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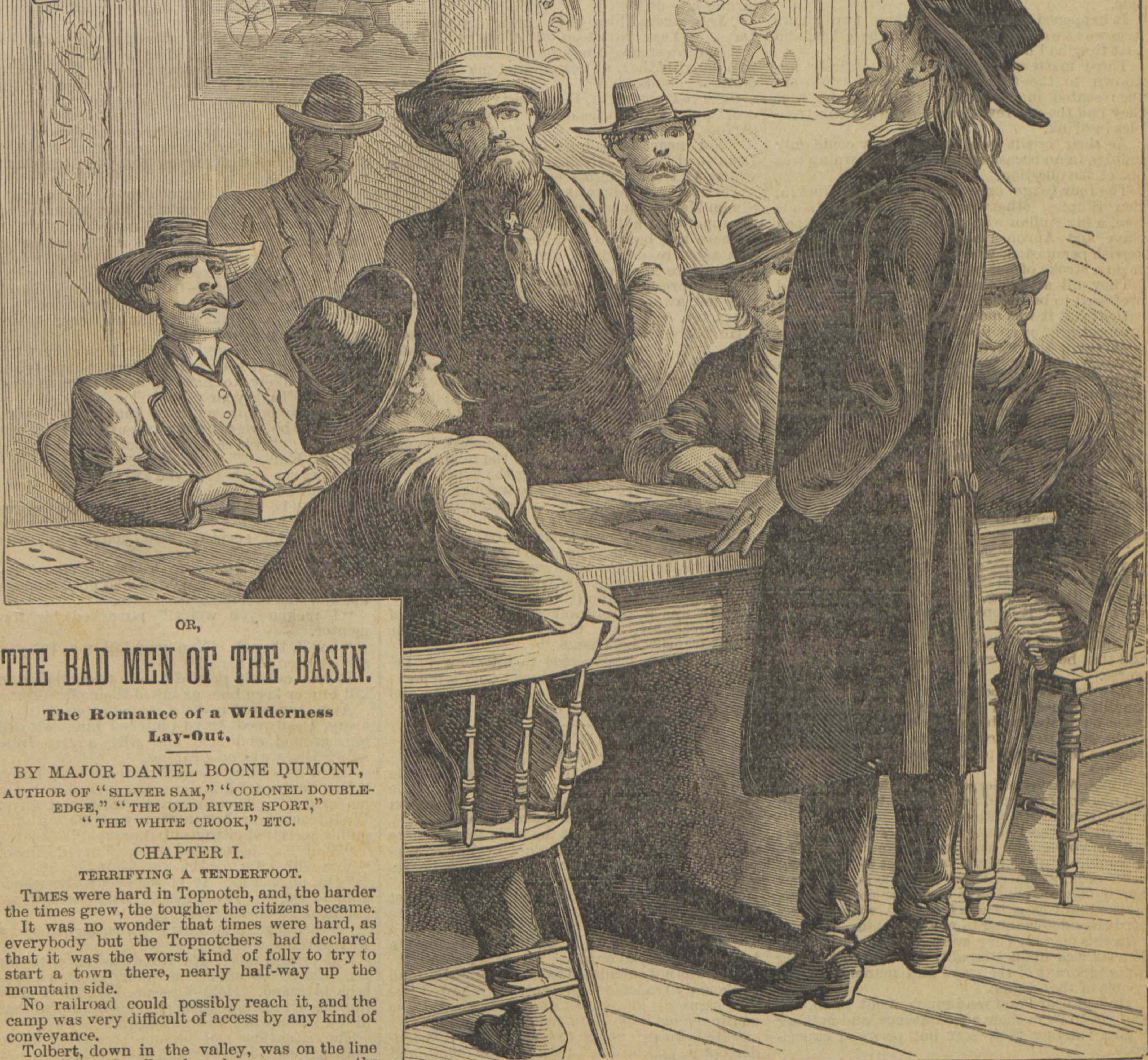
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TOPNOTCH TIM THE MAD PARSON



OR,

THE BAD MEN OF THE BASIN.

The Romance of a Wilderness
Lay-Out.

BY MAJOR DANIEL BOONE DUMONT,
AUTHOR OF "SILVER SAM," "COLONEL DOUBLE-
EDGE," "THE OLD RIVER SPORT,"
"THE WHITE CROOK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TERRIFYING A TENDERFOOT.

TIMES were hard in Topnotch, and, the harder the times grew, the tougher the citizens became. It was no wonder that times were hard, as everybody but the Topnotchers had declared that it was the worst kind of folly to try to start a town there, nearly half-way up the mountain side.

No railroad could possibly reach it, and the camp was very difficult of access by any kind of conveyance.

Tolbert, down in the valley, was on the line of a projected railroad, and was consequently booming its expectations in the liveliest style.

The Tolbertites were of the opinion that the

A HUSH THAT WAS ALMOST SOLEMN CAME OVER THAT ROUGH ASSEMBLAGE, WROUGHT NO LESS BY THE WONDERFUL VOICE THAN BY THE THRILLING WORDS OF THE HYMN.

only hope of Topnotch lay in its annexation to Tolbert by means of a land-slide or snow-slide that should sweep it down into the valley.

Some people were mean enough to say that not a bit of harm would be done if the remaining Topnotchers should be overwhelmed in that sudden removal.

Yet Topnotch had its excuse, and there had been a reason for its existence.

In the exciting events which are to form a portion of this narrative, the reason for the original establishment of the camp may more plainly appear.

Suffice it to say now that a very promising lead had been developed up there, and a wealthy company had been formed to work it out, and Topnotch therefore promised well at the start.

The vein had "petered out," and the wealthy company had abandoned the works, and what was there left for Topnotch?

The only wonder was that anybody remained there, and it was agreed that none but the toughest citizens could have "stuck it out."

But there was a day of regeneration at hand for Topnotch, or at least the promise of one, though the Topnotchers knew it not.

The forerunner of that regeneration was a slim young man who was seated one day in Bart McGinley's juicery, in the presence of a few of the toughest citizens of Topnotch.

The truth was that a new company had been formed to develop the abandoned mine, with better methods and improved machinery, and that the slim young man, whose name was Simon Marvel, and who was the son of a director of the company, had been sent to Topnotch to establish an office, and act as a kind of financial agent in advance of the operations.

He was a sandy-haired young man, with weak eyes, inoffensive in his manner, and very neat in his dress.

Another young man, Burch Blanton by name, and a mining engineer by profession, had been sent to Topnotch to select a site for the works, and lay out a practicable road up the mountain-side.

It happened that neither of those two young men was aware of the errand of the other, and that they had never met.

These matters, moreover, were entirely unknown to the four tough citizens who were then seated in McGinley's place, wishing that they had the wherewithal to drown their troubles in drink.

As their credit was limited, they could only indulge in an occasional bath, and drowning was out of the question.

The four tough ones were Sandy McGuckin, Ben Staples, otherwise known as Bad Lands Ben, a big ruffian who styled himself Deadwood Dave, and Aaron Isaacs, a gentleman of the Jewish persuasion, who had never been known to do a stroke of honest work.

They all styled themselves prospectors, and professed to be engaged in that reputable avocation; but it was more than surmised that their prospecting was confined to seeking out and appropriating the property of other people.

Simon Marvel, having lately "struck the camp," had in his simplicity inquired for a restaurant, and had been directed by some malicious and untruthful person to McGinley's juicery.

It was easy for him to perceive when he entered it that it did not have a bit of the look of a restaurant; but he accosted the proprietor, and wanted to know if he could get a lunch there.

"Thar's lunch fur them as drinks," gruffly replied Bart.

"Give me the best you can, then, and I will pay for that and my drink, too."

No doubt Simon Marvel believed that this was the liberal thing, though to the others who were present it appeared to be the acme of meanness.

That he should drink alone was bad enough, and that he should waste money on victuals was worse.

However, it was not easy to refuse such a reasonable request, and Bart McGinley ungraciously set out a shabby bit of lunch on a dirty table, at the same time directing the attention of his guest to the more important matter of something to drink.

Simon Marvel ordered some whisky, which he did not expect to use, and tackled his lunch with vigor, if not with enthusiasm.

It was neither nice to look at nor good to eat; but the young man was hungry, and he felt that it would not do to be too fastidious in Topnotch.

As soon as he entered the saloon, the four tough citizens, who have been mentioned above, marked him as a tenderfoot, and with one accord they determined to victimize him.

In this opinion they were justified, as Simon Marvel was unquestionably a tenderfoot, being quite ignorant of the ways and manners of the people of that region.

He had heard and read much about them, but had yet to form their acquaintance, and nothing "goes" among their sort but personal experience.

Having settled on him as a victim, the four proceeded to "roast" him in a style with which they were familiar.

Speaking so that he could easily hear them, they talked to each other as if continuing a previous conversation.

"What became of the tenderfoot, Dave, that you struck at Deadfall P'int?" inquired Sandy McGuckin.

"Became of him?" answered Deadwood Dave, with a hoarse laugh. "Well, what do you reckon? The coyotes have cleaned him up before now. When the Deadfall boys had got their fun out of him, they turned him over to us, and we made short work of him. He solemnly swore that he'd leave the country, and then we made a sure thing of his keepin' his oath."

"How did you do that, Dave?"

"Took him to the Deadfall, and jest pitched him over. I reckon that drop settled it."

"It ought to," observed Bad Lands Ben; "but that wasn't as neat a scheme as a few of us worked with a tenderfoot we met on the King-pin Road."

"Now we're goin' to git somethin' good," exclaimed Sandy McGuckin. "What was the scheme, Ben?"

"He was a tenderfoot from Softville, as anybody could see at a glance, and he was travelin' on a mule with saddlebags and a gripsack, and sech odds and ends as hammers and picks and pots and pans."

"No wonder you dropped onto him."

"You oughter seen the outfit. Well, we axed him what he had come here for, and he said he was goin' into the minin' business. We wanted to know how much money he had brought in, and he said 'twas only a little. We pulled him off his mule and searched him, and the durned cuss had told the truth. He didn't have money enough to last a decent white man a week."

"Jest like those tenderfoots," remarked big Dave. "He had the presumptuousness to come here, expectin' to make a livin' off the kentry."

"That's what the matter was. Of course we couldn't stand that sort o' foolishness, and so we strung him up."

"Jest strung him up?" scornfully observed Dave. "Thar warn't no sort o' fun in that."

"But we strung him up by the heels, and left him danglin' thar. The mule and the rest of the outfit we confiscated."

"Served him right, the poverty-stricken coyote!" put in Aaron Isaacs. "I do hate a tenderfoot."

"Not near as bad as I hate 'em," averred Deadwood Dave. "I allers go fur the galoots whenever I come across 'em."

This sort of talk was not a bit inspiring to Simon Marvel; it was not calculated to improve his appetite or aid his digestion.

There had been no such blood-curdling tragedies as were described, and the stories he had heard were merely imaginary, intended to terrify the presumed tenderfoot; but of course he was not aware of their fraudulent and windy character.

He perceived that he had got into the wrong place, that he was in a bad box, and it naturally occurred to him that the best thing he could do would be to get out of it as quietly as possible, before the men who were so fond of going for the tenderfooted ones should take it into their heads to go for him.

Leaving his glass of liquor untouched, he got up and stepped to the bar, with the intention of settling his account and leaving the house.

This was a move which the four tough citizens were by no means willing to permit, and they hastened to put a stop to it.

When Simon Marvel looked around to learn the cause of what seemed to be a sudden commotion in the saloon, he saw that two men had blockaded the door at his left, while two others were approaching him from the right.

There was a significant grin on the face of Bart McGinley, who highly approved of the preparations of his friends.

How could he be expected to interfere in behalf of an outsider, who was not only a tenderfoot, but was mean enough to drink alone and limit himself to one glass of whisky?

CHAPTER II.

FOUR AGAINST ONE.

SANDY MCGUCKIN and Ben Staples were the two men who blocked up the doorway, while those who advanced from the rear of the saloon were Deadwood Dave and Aaron Isaacs.

The big bully paused at the little table, where the stranger's untouched glass of liquor presented a temptation that was not to be resisted.

He drained the glass before Isaacs could get to it, and lifted up his voice in tones that were tough, if not tragic:

"Strike, cut, shoot! I smell the blood of a tenderfoot. Dead or alive, I'll git the galoot!"

This was not calculated to tranquilize the mind of the only tenderfoot present, who showed visible signs of uneasiness, and Deadwood Dave continued his unpleasant remarks.

"He is mean enough to drink alone, this tenderfoot is, and he don't take but one drink, and that he don't swaller."

"You helped him out of that part of the scrape, Dave," remarked Aaron.

"And you wanted to; but I got in ahead of you. Feller-citizens, what's to be done with a tenderfoot who hain't got no more conscience nor public sperret than *that*? Don't he ought to be took holt of and taught his duty to his kentry and his feller-man?"

"You've struck it right, Dave," observed Sandy McGuckin.

This was decidedly personal to the one tenderfoot in the saloon, and was calculated to prey upon his feelings, especially in view of the harrowing narratives to which he had listened; yet it was possible that harm was not intended him.

The only way to test the question was to attempt to leave the place, and for that purpose he moved toward the door.

There he was stopped by Bad Lands Ben and Sandy McGuckin, and the heavy grip of Deadwood Dave fell on his coat-collar.

"Not much, my cherub," firmly declared Dave. "Not much, my tenderfooted darling. You can't tear yourself away from us in that heartless style. As citizens of Topnotch who never go back on public sperrits or private liquor, we've got to investigate you."

"You had better leave me alone," replied Simon Marvel, trying to tristle up. "You don't know who I am."

"That's true enough, sonny, and you don't know who we are, either; but we are goin' to interjuice ourselves to you, and you are goin' to make our acquaintance in a way you will be likely to remember. Don't you reckon that afore the circus begins, you had better show your public sperrit by treatin' this party?"

It may be said for Simon Marvel that he was strongly inclined to repudiate this proposition.

Though by no means belligerent, he was not a coward, and it did not please him to feel that he was being imposed on; but his enemies were four to one, and he was helpless. It was barely possible that he might conciliate them; so he stepped to the bar, and invited them to drink.

They accepted this invitation with cheerful alacrity, ranging themselves so that there was no chance for him to escape.

He laid down a gold-piece to pay for the round, and the man behind the bar "hived it" with no ceremony.

"Where is my change?" inquired Simon.

"That's all right," answered Bart. "When the rest of the drinks is paid for, you'll git what's comin' to you."

"There are no more drinks to be paid for, and you have no right to keep my money."

"Can't you understand, my dear?" urged Deadwood Dave. "Just look at the matter in the light of public sperrit, and what would you expect? You axed us to drink, and we've begun to drink, but we hain't finished drinkin'. Don't r'ile us up by gittin' the thing wrong."

"This is nothing less than robbery," boldly protested the young man.

"Dear me! Hear him talk! If you don't try to git hold of a little public sperrit, young feller, you are likely to have a hard time in these parts. Whar's your mother?"

"Where is my mother?" innocently replied Simon, who was naturally surprised by the question. "Where is my mother? She is at Oneota, Kansas."

"Does she know that you are here?"

"I don't suppose she does."

"It's to be hoped she don't, as it might worry her to think that you'd got into trouble for the want of public sperrit. Now you're goin' to ax us to drink ag'in."

"Now I am going to leave this place!" declared the young man, who had got his spunk up, and was becoming desperate.

"I reckon you won't!" remarked his tormentor.

"I will, though. You may kill me, but you sha'n't keep me here."

It was quickly proved to him that they could kill him or keep him, as suited their pleasure.

As he turned to make a second attempt to get away, Deadwood Dave clutched him, whirled him around, and held him with a grip from which there was no escaping.

"Not this time, honey!" roared the big bully. "You have settled it now, you durned fool of a tenderfoot, and we mean to skin you alive. We'll teach you better than to trifle with the public-sperrited citizens of Topnotch."

"You had better let me go," urged Simon.

"You will suffer for this yet."

"Oh, no, not us. It is somebody else who is goin' to suffer. How does it strike you that we can be made to suffer, sonny?"

"When my father hears of this, he will find a way to settle with you."

"Hear him talk! He threatens us with his pa. That's too much for public-sperrited citizens to stand. Hold him up, Ben, till I land him one on his nose and spile his beauty so that his pa will never know him ag'in."

The situation had become something more than serious; it was actually terrifying.

Simon Marvel, unable to help himself, concentrated all his energies upon a yell for assistance.

"Help!" he shouted. "Murder!"

The four toughs were sure that no help could come to him, or they might not have been so cool and confident in their deliberate torture.

Yet there was help at hand, the presence of which they would never have suspected.

Burch Blanton, the mining engineer who had been sent to Topnotch in the employ of the new company, happened along, and had halted in front of McGinley's.

There was nothing of the look of the tenderfoot about Burch, who, though a young man, was fully six feet high and splendidly proportioned, with bronzed features and a general appearance of being able to stand the weather.

His stout corduroy trousers showed signs of wear; his high boots and his short coat with many pockets were made for hard work and rough usage.

The cartridge-belt at his waist proved that he was "heeled," and the keen gray eyes that flashed from under the rim of his wool hat gave token of a spirit that could back up the heeling.

He had looked in at the open doorway of the saloon, and had heard enough to understand what was going on there.

It will be perceived that the help at hand was not extensive; but it was willing and efficient.

At Simon Marvel's yell the engineer dashed into the saloon, and his action and words were alike effective.

"Let that man go!" he ordered, in clear and ringing tones, that spoke of power as well as purpose.

"Let him go, I say, or I will make daylight shine through you!"

Deadwood Dave stared in amazement at the intrepid stranger, and so did the others.

As he was only one man, his audacity in issuing orders to those four was surprising to them.

As big Dave did not instantly obey the order, Blanton seized his wrist, and gave it a twist that almost made him howl with pain as he dropped his grip on Simon Marvel's coat-collar.

"Run out of this, my friend," now ordered the engineer; and Simon, quickly availing himself of the privilege, darted out of the doorway.

Burch Blanton backed out, after him, holding the four tough citizens in check with a leveled revolver, which he had drawn and cocked.

The four were at first so astonished by his unexpected and audacious action, that they could make no move, thus allowing him to get a decided advantage.

CHAPTER III.

TOPNOTCH TIM.

BURCH BLANTON backed out into the street, but was followed by the four toughs, whose astonishment was immediately succeeded by the intensest anger.

It was a burning shame that one man should have been permitted to overawe them and rescue their victim from their clutches.

He was also evidently a stranger, and as such obnoxious to the Topnotchers.

Deadwood Dave turned himself loose to do justice to the occasion.

"Come on, boys!" he shouted. "Let's make an end of that pup, so that he'll never bark ag'in!"

The four toughs poured out of the saloon, and Bart McGinley, jumping over his counter, stood in the doorway and looked after them to behold the "circus."

Simon Marvel, who had awaited the exit of his new friend, thought when he saw the sally that the locality was a good one to get away from.

"Let's run," he suggested.

"You may run if you want to, and perhaps you had better," answered Blanton. "For my part, I can't afford to run."

Simon Marvel might have thought that he could afford to run; but he had too much manhood to do so, under the circumstances.

He drew his revolver, which had previously rested peacefully in his hip pocket, and prepared to stand by his rescuer.

Anyhow, it would be better to be killed in an open fight, than to be tortured to death by those miscreants in McGinley's bar-room.

There was one person in the vicinity who could afford to run; but his running did not carry him away from danger.

He came loping toward the scene of action with great strides, reaching it just as the four toughs were starting for Burch Blanton.

There was nothing of the tenderfoot about the new-comer, and in appearance and manner he was a peculiar person.

Fully as tall as Burch Blanton, he looked much taller, being remarkably gaunt and lean, but with thews and sinews that might be compared to those of a race-horse.

His long black hair and abundant beard were thickly streaked with gray, and his dark eyes shone with a strange and unnatural fire.

In dress, also, he was peculiar.

His stout woolen trousers and big boots would have well suited a miner or cattleman, and so would his rough slouch hat, to say nothing of the revolver and cartridge belt that were scarcely concealed.

The peculiar portion of his attire was a long

black frock coat, single-breasted, such as is worn by some clergymen, together with a white necktie under the collar of his coarse flannel shirt.

In his right hand he carried a long and heavy hickory stick, too long for a cane, but an excellent article for offensive or defensive purposes.

Blanton and Marvel stared in amazement at this man as he came bounding to where they stood, and the four toughs were evidently excited and apprehensive.

"Look out, Dave!" cried Sandy McGuckin.

"Here comes Topnotch Tim!"

The man who was styled Topnotch Tim halted in front of the two young men, and faced the others.

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" he cried in a loud voice as he brandished his stick and shook it threateningly at the toughs.

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon! Beware its might! What do you mean, ye hell-deserving pups of Satan? Are there no hen-roosts or clothes-lines for you to rob, no new-dropped calves or sick lambs to steal, that you molest and maltreat two decent white strangers who have come here to build up your gone-to-seed, rum-soaked, God-forsaken town? If they knew you as well as I do, they would put up their pistols and kick you out of Topnotch, as I hope they soon will do."

"Git away from here, parson," replied Deadwood Dave. "Stand out of the way, or you may git hurt."

"Get hurt! I get hurt? Who is to hurt me, I would like to know?"

"What is to hinder me from blowin' a hole through you with this gun?"

"Everything is to hinder you. You do not dare to do it. The Lord God of Israel would strike you dead, you big loafer!"

As the old man uttered these impressive words, he seemed to grow taller, and his face was lighted up as that of a prophet of old-time might have been.

He looked as if he really believed what he said, and the four toughs looked as if they believed it, too.

At all events, they stared at him in a hesitating way, as if they supposed him to be possessed of some mysterious power.

"Here I am!" he shouted again. "Shoot if you dare! I have not near as much fear of you as I would have of a skunk. You are a coward of the meanest kind, and so are all the mangy gang you run with, fit for nothing but to soak whisky and sneak around to steal the property of decent people. Unless you can double-bank a man, you would never dare to look at him. A little while, now, and you will go to the place appointed for liars and drunkards and thieves, and the world will be well rid of you."

Strange as it seemed to Burch Blanton, the big bully did not raise his revolver, nor did either of the three others make any hostile demonstration.

Perhaps they really feared the old fellow who denounced them so plainly and bitterly, or perhaps the truth of the denunciation struck them so forcibly that they were unable to object to it.

Whatever the cause, they looked like whipped curs as they stood and listened to that vigorous oburgation.

Topnotch Tim advanced toward them, brandishing his stick as if he needed no other weapon to cope with such adversaries.

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" he cried again. "Scatter, ye miscreants! Get to your dens, ye wolves! Get to your holes, you cowardly coyotes, whose yelp is always worse than your bite! Sneak off, I say, and hide yourselves, and await the day of doom!"

To the surprise of the two young men, his order was immediately obeyed.

The four toughs did sneak off, silently and as if ashamed of themselves, and re-entered McGinley's saloon and closed the door behind them.

It was well enough for them that they did so, as the loud voice of Topnotch Tim and the apparently belligerent group had attracted to the scene several men, among whom was Perry Burnham, the proprietor of the Topnotch Hotel, where Burch Blanton had engaged a room and board.

So seldom did Burnham get hold of a guest in those days, that he could not allow such an angel visitant to be killed or damaged; therefore, seeing Blanton in what appeared to be a difficulty, he had hastened to his assistance.

Topnotch Tim followed the toughs to their hole in McGinley's saloon, and then walked swiftly down the street, his long strides, as well as his general appearance, making him a conspicuous figure.

"It was wonderful, the way the old man scattered those scalawags," remarked Simon Marvel, who was then as bold as a lion.

He had stood by his rescuer when they two were pitted against four, and had risen considerably in his own opinion.

"There is another strange thing about it," added Blanton. "He spoke of us as two men who had come here to build up the town. How could he know anything about that? I have been sent here to prepare the way for the

new mining company; but you, my friend, may I ask what brought you here?"

"I am here on business for the mining company, too," answered Simon.

"Then we are partners, and must work together."

"I will be glad to work with you, sir, and it is a great pleasure to have met you. It is more than a pleasure, because, if you had not come to my help as you did, I am afraid that those scoundrels would have robbed me, and perhaps murdered me."

"We are both well out of that scrape, thanks to the old man. My name is Burch Blanton. What is yours?"

"Simon Marvel, and I am the son of one of the directors of the company."

"I know your father, or know of him. To keep out of such scrapes in the future you had better go to the hotel with me, where I am putting up. Mr. Burnham, here, is another victim for you. We two will help the cause a little, and when the mine gets started up again, you may expect to do a land-office business."

Perry Burnham accompanied his guests to the hotel, glad to keep one and to get another.

On the way Blanton asked him who and what the old man was who had so thoroughly terrified the toughs.

"His name is Timothy Marlow," answered the landlord. "He used to be a preacher, and I have no doubt that he was a good one. His wife ran away with another man, and that is what upset his mind. He quit preaching because he said that Satan had got hold of him, and that he had no right to meddle with the Gospel while he was fully determined to kill that man if he could ever discover him. Some people call him Topnotch Tim, because he lives high up on Topnotch Mountain with his daughter. He surely knows where there is gold, and has some secret diggings of his own, as he used to bring plenty of dust and scales and nuggets to town, and I suppose he does yet, unless he has transferred his trade to Tolbert."

"I will be bound that he is not lacking in sense," observed Blanton, "though he may be crazy on one point. I would like to meet him and have a talk with him, as I believe he could give me some good advice about laying out a road."

"Don't you consider him a very brave man, Mr. Burnham?" inquired Simon Marvel.

"Brave or reckless, it is hard to say which. It may be because he is crazy and don't know any better, but it is certain that he fears nothing in this world."

CHAPTER IV.

SIMON MARVEL AS A HUNTER.

WITHIN a week after the unpleasant occurrence that had signalized his advent in Topnotch, Simon Marvel, who had secured an office, but had little or nothing to do, set forth on a hunting excursion.

It may be said for Simon that he dressed the character to perfection, and, though the performance might not come up to the appearance, he had the satisfaction of believing that he was highly attractive.

Though the wild beasts and birds might not cheerfully come forward to be killed, female eyes would rest upon him with pleasure, and he might count on making a conquest if he should meet any of the marketable sex.

Indeed, he was "got up regardless," and it seemed a pity that his sweetness should be wasted on the desert air, as it was not at all likely that he would meet any possible admirers after he got out of sight of Topnotch.

The result proved that as a hunter he was more beautiful than successful.

He wandered far up the mountain-side, and roamed about until noon, without killing anything or seeing a chance to kill anything.

Then he found himself pretty weary, as well as with a well-developed appetite, and was angry with himself because he had not had sufficient forethought to put a lunch in his ornamental game-bag.

He had entertained the delusive idea of killing game, and cooking and eating it, in true woodland style.

It was easy enough to cure the fatigue by sitting down and resting; but the appetite was not so readily satisfied.

He struck a trail that led up a steep ravine, and finally brought him out on a broad and level plateau, from which there was a most magnificent view of the country below, mountain, plain and valley, as far as the eye could reach.

But the most delightful view to Simon Marvel just then was a substantial log house at the back of the plateau, about which were visible various evidences of comfort and prosperity.

There was a kitchen garden, fenced and thrifty, and there was a barn which hinted at horses and cattle, and there were flowers in abundance around the house.

Better than all was the sight of a young woman who was seated near the door, busily engaged in sewing.

She was a remarkably handsome young woman, in spite of the fact that her face was somewhat browned by the sun and wind, and her

age might be guessed at as about nineteen, though her height, when she stood up, made her look older.

She was neatly dressed in calico, with nothing unusual about her apparel, and her head was covered with a wide-brimmed straw hat.

It may be added that her dark eyes were large and lustrous, and that her dark hair was tastefully arranged.

She arose when she saw Simon Marvel, and gazed at him with a smile which he did not easily interpret.

At first he supposed it to be a smile of admiration, and was ready to plume himself upon a conquest; but he was sharp enough to perceive, on a nearer approach, that it was a smile of amusement which possibly might not be a bit complimentary.

He did not allow a little thing like that to bother him, as he was then very hungry, and he thought he saw before him a fine chance to get something to eat, and at the same time to enjoy the society of a pretty girl.

So he advanced toward her, raising his hat, and carrying himself, as he believed, very gracefully.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said; "but I've been hunting."

"You need not beg my pardon for that," she answered promptly.

"Excuse me; I merely wished to say that I have been hunting."

"In your imagination?"

"In these hills."

She looked him over from head to foot with an inquisitive glance, and walked around him, to make her scouting more complete.

"Beg pardon," remarked the young man; "but, is there anything wrong about me?"

"Nothing wrong that I can see," she answered. "I was looking for your game. Is it possible that you have a bear or a mountain lion concealed anywhere about you?"

It was clear that she was making fun of him, and Simon smiled his best smile.

"That's a very good joke," said he. "The fact is, miss, that I have not shot anything today. I was too much engaged, you see, in admiring the beauty of the scenery."

"And your own beauty."

"Thank you. You flatter me."

"I did not intend to."

"As I was trying to say, miss, I have been hunting, and the tramp up and about this mountain has made me very hungry, and I hoped that I might be able to get something to eat here."

"We don't keep a hotel, sir."

"Of course you do not; but you will surely take compassion on a weary traveler. If you could let me have a little milk, I would be glad to get it."

"Milk? Well, we may be able to get hold of some milk. I will see what can be done."

The girl whistled, and a beautiful black mare, with a frisky little foal, came out from behind the barn, and bounded toward her, neighing as she came, and stopped, as if expecting sugar or some other dainty.

"Dolly is giving the colt plenty of milk," said she, "and I suppose she could spare some to a weary traveler in distress. I don't think I could milk her; but perhaps you are more capable than I am."

Simon Marvel opened his eyes wide at this proposition.

"No, thanks," he answered, "I never milked anything but a jug, and I really would not care for mare's milk. If I could get a few new-laid eggs, now—"

"Oh, that is not impossible, though I am afraid that it would be rather difficult. Do you see that tree yonder?"

She pointed at a tall tree near the edge of the plateau, which was bare of branches for fully fifty feet from the ground.

"I think I perceive the tree that you mean," answered Simon. "Is there anything peculiar about it?"

"A buzzard has made its nest in the top of that tree. It may be a hard tree to climb; but, if you could get up there, it is quite likely that you would find some eggs in the nest."

"I am afraid it would be too much for me, miss. I never climbed anything, and I do not believe that I would relish buzzards' eggs."

"The best thing you can do, then, will be to step into the house and take what you can get. We have no milk or eggs, but you are welcome to what there is."

"I will be thankful for what you are willing to give me. Beg pardon, miss; but are you all alone here?"

"Just now I am. At present I am the only man on the place."

"Are you not afraid to stay here alone?"

"Not a bit of it. I am pretty well able to take care of myself. Come on, sir."

She led the way into the cabin, and set before the young man some eatables which, though cold, were quite appetizing, and a hot cup of tea completed his gratification.

She left him there to enjoy his lunch at his leisure, and resumed her seat and her sewing outside.

While Simon Marvel was satisfying his appe-

tite, he inspected the interior of the cabin, and was surprised at the evidences of comfort and even of refinement that he found there.

There were books in plenty, with many tasteful articles and ornaments, such as he could never have expected to see in such a house or in such a locality.

Having finished a hasty meal, he went out to where the young woman was seated.

"You have given me a sumptuous repast," said he, "and I am greatly obliged to you. If I knew of any way to repay you for your kindness—"

"You can do that easily, Mr. Marvel," she answered promptly. "You see that I know you. You are the young man who got into a scrape in Topnotch with Deadwood Dave and his gang, and my father happened along in time to get you out of the scrape."

"Is your father, then, the man they call Topnotch Tim?"

"The very same man, and I am Topnotch Tim's Susie. My name is Susie Marlow, Mr. Marvel. You may tell me, if you will, who was that other young man who was with you, the one who came to your help? I have seen him since then with my father, who has never brought him here, and does not seem to want to tell me anything about him."

"That man, Miss Marlow, is Burch Blanton, an engineer connected with the new mining company. He is my particular friend, and one of the finest fellows who ever lived."

"Thank you. Now you may go."

"I am in no hurry," protested Simon.

"You ought to be. If you are going to shoot anything before night, you have no time to lose."

"I am not a bit anxious to shoot anything."

"But you have been here long enough, and I, as the only man on the place, order you off the premises. Good-by, Mr. Marvel."

"Good-by, Miss Marlow. You are very cruel."

The young man, loth to leave the place, slowly descended the trail by which he had reached the plateau.

Hardly had he got down into the glen, when he was seized from the rear by a man who sprung out from behind a tree, and was quickly bound and gagged.

Looking up from the ground as he lay there, he saw the big form and bloated face of Deadwood Dave, whose features were as expressive as they could be of gratified malice.

"I've got you now," grunted the big ruffian. "I've got you now, you dandified tenderfoot, and you are goin' to git sech a thrashin' as will make you wish you had never crossed the path of Deadwood Dave."

As Simon Marvel could not speak, he had no chance to argue the point, and could only submit to his fate.

But somebody else had a word to say in the matter.

"Not this time, you big bully," said a clear voice, womanly, but full of firmness and determination.

Looking around, Deadwood Dave saw Susan Marlow standing some ten paces from him, with a leveled rifle aimed at his head.

"You are out of your reckoning again," she went on to say. "Topnotch Tim is not here; but his daughter is on hand, and is fully able to attend to your case."

"You had better go away from here and mind your own business," the big brute growled.

"My business just now is to scatter you away from here in short order, and I mean to attend to it right up to the handle! Do you see this gun? It shoots seven times without loading, and nobody can shoot it straighter than I can. Be off, now, before I turn it loose and bore you full of holes."

As the ruffian hesitated, she ordered him again, more peremptorily than before.

"Be off, I say, and be quick about it, or I will shoot, as sure as there is a God in Israel!"

It was clear that she meant what she said, and Deadwood Dave sadly perceived that she had the drop on him.

"I'll pay you for this yet," he snarled as he turned and walked down the glen.

Susan Marlow watched him until he was out of sight; then she untied Simon, and removed the gag from his mouth.

As soon as the young man could speak, he began to be voluble in his expressions of gratitude.

"I don't want any thanks," she protested.

"It was only fun for me to bother that big loafer. You had better not return to Topnotch by the way you came, as that rascal might be lying in wait for you at some other point. Come with me, and I will show you another trail."

When Susan Marlow had taken the young man to the trail she spoke of, and had given him directions for finding his way to Topnotch, she gave him a parting word of advice.

"You had better not go far away from Topnotch, unless you are in company," she advised.

"That ruffian seems to have a grudge against you, and is sneak enough to work it out in a meaner way than you could imagine."

"I believe you are right about that, Miss Marlow, and I shall follow your advice. But, I would like to come out here."

"Never mind that. By the way, Mr. Marvel, of course you will not mention it to that friend of yours that I asked you about him. That would not be fair, you know."

Simon, who was just then inclined to be jealous of Burch Blanton, promised that willingly, and safely found his way back to Topnotch.

CHAPTER V.

PLOTTING AT TOPNOTCH.

IN the course of time, and not a long time, the new mining company had begun active operations in the vicinity of Topnotch.

The new road up the mountain, which Burch Blanton had surveyed and laid out, with the advice and assistance of Timothy Marlow, had been speedily constructed, and proved to be a great success, rendering the town much easier of approach from below than it had been by the former route.

The works had been fully established, the true vein had been struck in the mine, and everything indicated wealth for the company and a great revival of prosperity for Topnotch.

Already there had been a considerable influx of population to the town, and old buildings were being repaired and occupied, and new buildings were being erected.

Business had started up briskly, and Topnotch promised to again become a lively and go-ahead camp.

The old Topnotchers predicted that this apparent prosperity was only temporary, that the mine would soon peter out, and Topnotch would go to seed again; but the others took no notice of these prophets of evil, being content to enjoy the boom while it was booming.

Among the chronic grumblers was Bart McGinley, in whose establishment there was no change.

The same dingy windows were there, the same unpleasant interior, the same disreputable array of bottles and demijohns, and the same scowling but cunning face behind the counter.

He had the same customers, too, having attracted no new ones, but easily keeping the old ones, who could scarcely be called profitable.

Thus it happened that one day the same four tough citizens, who have been previously mentioned in this narrative, were seated around a table in McGinley's saloon, sourly and bitterly discussing the boom that had come to Topnotch.

With them was seated the proprietor, who became so deeply interested in the discussion that he was quite liberal in answering the orders of his impecunious customers, as well as in furnishing drinks on his own account.

It was the unanimous opinion of the conclave that the prosperity of Topnotch could not last; yet there was no question of the reality of the boom while it did last.

"What do we git out of it?" queried Deadwood Dave. "That's the question."

The others looked as if the prospect of getting something out of anything was very faint just then.

"That's the question," continued Dave, "for us to consider as old Topnotchers and public-spirited citizens. What do we git out of it? The greedy grabbers may git rich and git away with the money; but whar do we come in? Jest nowhar."

"Jest nowhar," echoed the others.

"The money that's floatin' around Topnotch about now ort to belong to us; but how are we to git at it? If we try to lay our hands onto it, what's likely to come o' that? Times ain't like what they used to was. Too much of what they call law and order has been piled up here in Topnotch, and that means the oppression of the poor and shettin' down on us public-spirited citizens. If we start in to be a bit enterprisin', like as not we'll be jammed into somebody's jail. Talk about a free kentry! Roosha can't be wuss'n this is."

It was agreed that the speaker had faithfully pictured the sad state of affairs then prevalent at Topnotch.

There could be no doubt that things were as bad as they could be; but what remedy was there for the acknowledged evils?

"What are we goin' to do about it?" demanded Dave. "What can we do about it? I confess that I'm up a stump. If anybody sees light ahead, let him speak."

"It's a question that concerns our whisky," observed Sandy McGuckin, "to say nothin' of victuals and clothes. I've been thinkin' it over right hard, and it seems to me that the best thing we can do is to forage on the enemy."

"Jest what we want to do," grunted Dave. "Everybody knows that. How are we goin' to do it? That's the question."

"That's what I set out to tell you. The enemy is the mine. That's where the money comes from, and that's where we must apply to get our share of it. What we've got to do is to write an anonymous letter to the mine people, telling them that they must send us a sum of money that we will agree on, or their machinery and buildings will suffer. Of course the letter must be anonymous."

"Must be what?" inquired Dave, who was willing to admit that he was puzzled.

"Anonymous," repeated Sandy, who was clearly in love with the word. "That means,

you understand, that nobody need sign his name to it. We can put a coffin, or the skull and bones, at the bottom of the letter, and tell 'em to send the answer to Bart McGinley's place."

"I wonder, now," pondered Dave, "whether a jail might be in any way mixed up with that sort o' thing."

"No chance of it," answered McGuckin, "when the letter is anonymous."

"Well, Sandy, you had better work that racket—you and Isaac—as you are both good hands at usin' pens. I've got a scheme, too, and will want you to help me."

"Give us your scheme, Dave," put in Bad Lands Ben.

"That crazy old galoot—if he is crazy—of a Topnotch Tim has put us in the mud. He got us skeered—for one, I'm willin' to own it—and then flung us down and walked over us. It stands us in hand to git even with him, and we can do it, easy as rollin' off a log."

"How?" inquired Ben.

"By way of his gal. He leaves her at home alone, as I've reason to know, and we can slip up thar when he is away and carry her off. If anythin' could rattle him wuss'n that, I'd like to know what it is."

"It would tear him all to pieces," declared McGuckin. "But what would we do with the girl when we got her?"

"I'd look out for that," answered Dave. "I'd take good keer of her, you may bet your eye-teeth."

"That might be very well for you, Davey, but where is there any money in it for us?"

"Money? Thar's other things besides money. Gittin' even is one."

"That's all well enough," interrupted Aaron Isaacs. "Gettin' even is a good thing; but there's more ways than one to get even. I've been thinkin' this thing over, too, and I can tell you how to get even, and at the same time to get hold of a lot of money, or money's worth."

"That sounds well," observed Ben Staples. "Give it to us as straight as you can, Aaron."

"I will give it to you as straight as a shingle. We all know that Topnotch Tim has brought lots of gold into town to sell, in the way of dust and scales and nuggets. So we know that he must have a diggin's somewhere, as nobody gets gold out of nothin'. We must find his diggin's."

"That's been tried," said Sandy. "I've hunted the place myself, and so has Dave, and so have lots of other fellers; but nary find. No amount of watchin' and waitin' and creepin' and sneakin' has ever done any good. If he ever goes to that place, he goes like a spook or a witch, and nobody has ever caught him at it."

"That is because nobody has ever gone to work the right way," replied Isaacs. "I know how to get onto the scheme and find the diggin's; but I will want you fellers to help me."

"If we could do that, it would be a big thing," said Dave; "but I don't see much chance. I think my scheme is the best."

"And I think mine is the best," put in McGuckin.

"I am sure that you would find mine to be the best if you would try it," averred Isaacs. "How does it look to you, Bart?"

Bart McGinley, in fact, was the umpire, the general counselor of the gang that owned Deadwood Dave as its leader, and the arbiter in case of disputes or differences of opinion.

When his counsel was asked he had his own way of giving it and getting at the question.

"It's my drinks this time, boys," he said, and he produced the necessary exhilaration.

Having duly primed himself, he was as ready as Jack Bunsby was to "give an opinion as is an opinion."

"You are all right, boys," decided he; "that is, the three of you. Sandy's plan is a good one, and he ort to try it. If it don't work, we'll know the reason why. Dave's scheme is all right, too. Thar's no way you kin hit Topnotch Tim so hard as by robbin' him of his gal, no matter what becomes of her arter he loses her. At the same time, if it works as easy as Dave says it will, you might pick up somethin' at his house that would pay for the trouble of goin' thar, and that's worth lookin' arter. As for Aaron's scheme, that depends on whether he can do what he says he can. If he can, it's a big thing. Try 'em all, boys. If one don't work, another will. Go in strong, and work 'em for all they're worth, and I reckon it won't be long afore I'm able to wipe all your accounts off the slate."

CHAPTER VI.

A VERY PECULIAR GAME.

THE renewed prosperity of Topnotch naturally brought to the camp many adventurers, who hoped to fatten on the new wealth of the new-old town.

Among them was a man whose arrival created no little stir in the camp, especially on the part of Deadwood Dave and his friends.

This was no less a personage than Dan Lasher, known by the sobriquet of "Handsome Dan," who was widely reputed as one of the best faro-dealers and short-card players that could be found anywhere.

It must be said, however, that "Handsome

Dan" was not as young as he had been, and it was one of the most strenuous struggles of his life to prevent other people from discovering that mournful fact.

His black hair and long and heavy mustache were assiduously dyed, and he had got into the habit of using preparations to abolish or mollify the crows'-feet and wrinkles that had begun to disfigure his face.

As his two hands had not lost their cunning, and his skill at cards was quite as pre-eminent as it had ever been, he need not, as far as his pecuniary interests were concerned, have given so much attention to his personal appearance; but the truth was that he was proud of his conquests among the fair sex, and desired to continue them indefinitely.

A stage was then running regularly over the road which Burch Blanton had constructed from the valley up to Topnotch, and Dan Lasher was one of the passengers by the crowded conveyance.

Though his journey had been a tedious one, when he stepped out of the stage on its arrival at Topnotch he looked as if he had just issued from a band-box.

Preparations had been made for him in advance by trusted friends and agents; rooms having been secured and furnished, in which he was to open an extensive gambling establishment; but he did not visit it at once, as it was night when he reached the camp.

He listened to the words of welcome and admiring congratulations of those who had awaited him, like a king receiving the homage of his subjects, and adjourned to the hotel, where he held a reception until a late hour.

The next day he supervised the finishing touches that were being put to his apartments, and at night opened his game in grand style.

He had made his rooms as attractive as possible, in order to allure his victims, and the opening night was an occasion of special festivity, and of course there was a big crowd present.

When his guests had been given a chance to eat and drink and inspect the place, Handsome Dan opened his faro game, and the lay-out was speedily confronted by an abundance of eager bettors.

Shortly afterward there was an arrival, which caused no little stir in the assemblage, as well as some consternation.

The tall form of Topnotch Tim was visible as he pushed his way through the crowd, and his dark eyes were glaring with even a more lurid fire than usual.

No person spoke to him or tried to hinder his progress; but all who knew him wondered what had brought the Mad Parson to such a place.

He pressed as near to the faro table as he could get, and then began to sing, in clear and musical tones, a camp-meeting hymn.

The strangeness of this performance compelled the attention of all, and a hush that was almost solemn came over that rough assemblage, wrought no less by the wonderful voice than by the thrilling words of the hymn.

When he had finished the hymn he began to speak concerning the evils of gambling, exhorting his hearers to resist temptation and abandon the accursed practice.

His exhortation, though brief, was rarely eloquent.

Every word was pointed, and every phrase went straight to the mark.

It was wonderful that so much meaning could be compressed into so small a space.

No person attempted to stop him or interfere with him in any way, and not a word was spoken by anybody but himself.

Handsome Dan, who had just emptied his box when the singing began, suspended further proceedings for a while, and leaned his head on his hand with a tired look.

Shortly he raised his eyes, and gazed intently at Topnotch Tim until he had concluded his performance, if it may be so called.

Having finished his exhortation, the Mad Parson crossed his hands upon his breast, closed his eyes, and began to pray.

His prayer, like his speech, was brief but eloquent, full of burning words and earnest thoughts most vividly expressed.

There could be no doubt that it produced a strong, though probably only a temporary effect upon his mixed audience.

Many heads were bowed, and a solemn silence reigned until he had finished his prayer.

Then Dan Lasher spoke up.

"Now that those interesting but rather fire-some exercises are concluded, gentlemen, we will resume the game."

He shuffled a pack of cards, calling on the players to make their bets.

Suddenly a great change came over Topnotch Tim.

At first a look of disappointment overspread his face; but it was succeeded by an eager and almost vindictive glare as he glanced at the dealer and the lay-out.

"Is that all I have gained by it?" he cried. "Do the Word of God and the solemn warnings you have heard affect you no more than that? Now, then, for the sword of the Lord and of Gideon! If one way won't work, another may."

He pushed his way to the faro-table, pulled a buckskin bag from an inside pocket, and handed it to Dan Lasher.

"Weigh that dust," he said, "and give me chips for it."

Then the surprise of the crowd was greater than ever, and the situation became yet more interesting to them.

What was the matter with the Mad Parson?

A moment ago he had been denouncing the evil of gambling most bitterly, and now he was rushing in to "buck against" a faro game, hotter and more eager for a conflict with the tiger than any of the other players.

Those who had believed him to be crazy were more than ever convinced that his head had quite gone wrong.

Dan Lasher, who was accustomed to "dust" transactions, and whose business it was to take everything as a matter of course, produced a pair of scales, very fine and delicately adjusted.

Into one side he poured a quantity of shining scales from the buckskin bag, and in the other he placed the weights, quickly determining the value of the gold.

Then he passed a pile of chips over to Topnotch Tim, who counted and arranged them like an experienced hand.

It soon became apparent that if the Mad Parson played a crazy game, there was a special providence that favored crazy men with luck.

He appeared to be playing with a system—at least, there seemed to be a systematic method in the way he placed his chips on the cards to which he gave his preference.

Anyhow, he won from the start, and he kept increasing his bets and winning almost constantly, in such a brilliant and astonishing style as compelled most of the other players to drop out of the game, that they might watch him and stare at him.

Three or four stayed in, endeavoring to avail themselves of the Mad Parson's luck by following his bets; but this proceeding was viewed with disfavor by the others, and they, too, dropped out.

Handsome Dan was evidently nervous, a most unusual thing for him.

He kept his head down most of the time, and handled his cards with a strange appearance of uncertainty and indecision.

Whenever he looked up, however, he found the lurid and glittering eyes of the Mad Parson fastened upon him with such a gaze as made unfair play on his part impossible.

So the queer game went on, and the crowd pushed forward and stared in wonder as Topnotch Tim piled up his winnings.

"That's all," called out Dan Lasher, at last. "The bank's broke. Two thousand was the limit, and it is all gone."

The Mad Parson cashed in his chips like an old gambler, and stuffed the gold and notes into his pocket.

"That two thousand," he said to the dealer, "is your contribution to the new Baptist church that is to be built here. I will call around before long to see if you are ready with another contribution."

Nobody then present had ever seen Dan Lasher in such a flurry before. He actually trembled as he fidgeted in his chair, and his eyes turned this way and that, but never met the lurid and gleaming orbs of his late opponent.

"You can't play here any more," he retorted. "You can't either preach or gamble here again."

"Why not?" inquired Topnotch Tim. "Are you willing to admit before these people that you are afraid of a messenger of salvation?"

"You may be a messenger from the devil for all I care, and I am not afraid of any kind of a messenger. But, I don't play with crazy people when I know it, and you must not come here any more."

"This place is open to the public," answered the Mad Parson, "and I think I will come here when I want to."

"You may be able to get in; but you shall not play here."

"We will see about that. I am much obliged to you for this contribution, and will call on you for another."

When the Mad Parson had left his place Dan Lasher opened another game, and before the night was over he won from others quite as much money as he had lost to Topnotch Tim.

Deadwood Dave was present during the episode that has been narrated, and he stayed near the faro game a long time afterward, though he made no attempt to play, not having the wherewithal for such indulgence.

When the place was shut up, he sought a private interview with Dan Lasher, and they settled down in a quiet place for what Dave called a business talk.

"That old man cut into you right sharp," observed the big fellow.

"Yes, curse him! He had the devil's own luck. I wish I could hit upon a plan to keep him away from my place. I don't like his style a bit. It would never do to allow such business as preaching and praying, and then starting in to buck against the game."

"Specially when the preacher beats the game and breaks the bank. Seems to me, Mr. Lasher,

that you owe that old party a grudge, and that the best way to get even with him will be, as old Grant said, to move onto his works."

"How am I to do that?"

"You don't need to do it yourself. You can hire it done, if you want to. The old cuss has got a darter."

"I believe he has," observed Handsome Dan, musingly. "She must be quite a woman now."

"One of the purtiest critters you ever laid eyes onto—just as bright and sassy as you please. He and she live 'way up on Topnotch Mountain, and he often goes away and leaves her alone."

"What has that to do with me?"

"A heap, if you want it to. I've got a grudge ag'inst Topnotch Tim, myself, and I and some other fellers have made it up, to speak plain, to carry off his gal. The only thing that puzzles me is that I don't know what to do with her arter I git hold of her. Now, if you would keefur such a piece o' property—"

"What's that you are saying, Dave Steiner?" sharply demanded Handsome Dan.

"Ain't it plain enough? Don't see how I can make it any plainer. I say that we are goin' to carry off the gal, and that you can have her if you want her."

Handsome Dan's rather worn and faded face was lighted up.

"Is she very handsome?" he asked.

"Handsome ain't no name fur it. She is just the loveliest thing, to my notion, that walks the earth."

"She ought to be; she must be," mused Dan.

"And you can have her for the takin', and by so doin' git even with the old cuss who broke your bank."

"It will keep him away from here, too. I believe that will suit me, Dave. Put the girl where I can get her, and you and your friends shall have a big pile of money. But I must not be known in the matter."

"No reason why you should be. We are pards, then, Dan."

"Pards? Nothing of the kind, and you need not call me Dan. I haven't got that low, and I hope I never will. When I want a partner, I choose one to suit myself. When I pay a man to do a job for me, and it is done, that ends it. When this job is done, you had better make sure that it is ended, as far as you are concerned."

"All right, Cap; I reckon I understand you," answered the big ruffian as he rose to go.

"Hold on, Dave. Here is some money to help you start the scheme and carry it through. If it works well, there will be plenty more for you."

Handsome Dan handed his confederate or tool a sum of money that made him open his eyes—enough to supply himself and his friends with an abundance of whisky for some time to come.

"Yes, she must be beautiful," mused the gambler when Deadwood Dave had left him. "She is sure to be a very handsome woman by this time. She must be mine. The more I think of it, the stronger I settle on that. When I get her, I will keep her, and then I will be even, if not a little more so."

CHAPTER VII.

TOUGHS ON THE TRAIL.

It had been a sunny day on the plateau where Topnotch Tim had his dwelling-place.

Under the smiling warmth of the sun, the vegetables in the kitchen-garden and the flowers about the house seemed to have taken a fresh start, and could almost be seen to grow.

Near the hour of dusk, Susan Marlow was seated in her favorite place in front of the house, rather lazily engaged in sewing or mending.

Indeed, she was occupied with gazing at the vast expanse of sky and the splendid prospect of distant mountains, and in meditating with a wistful look in her dark eyes, rather than with the work that often lay idly in her lap.

From the cabin issued a man whose appearance was a striking contrast to that of the lovely girl.

He was a dwarf, seeming to be nearly as broad as he was long, and there was not so much as a hint of good looks about him.

His breadth of chest and loins indicated great strength, and, if he could have been stretched out and given the height of an ordinary man, there would have been enough of him for the purpose.

His face was entirely covered with hair, except the nose, a little space under the eyes, and a low line of forehead, and its expression just then, as far as it could be seen, appeared to be amiable.

His only visible garments were a blue flannel shirt, a pair of coarse trousers, heavy boots that were proof against snake-bites, and a red skull-cap, from under which his dark hair flowed down upon his shoulders.

This man, who was the faithful and unwearying servitor of Timothy Marlow, answered to the name of Caesar, and was a deaf mute of whom the ex-clergyman had taken charge years ago.

Susan's face lighted up when she saw him, and she questioned him with rapid fingers.

"Kettle boils," he answered. "All right inside."

"I wish father would come home."

Cæsar intimated by his expressive gestures that he wished it, too.

"I suppose it is hardly worth while to expect him," Susan said to herself. "Of late days he has been absent so much more than formerly, and I never know where to look for him, and am always afraid that he will get into trouble."

Cæsar evidently understood her by watching the motions of her lips, and he began to talk fast with his fingers.

"He is all right. He can take care of himself, and I can take care of you. He will come home safe when he gets ready. When he does come, I will have a fine lot of gold for him."

The dwarf brought out from an inside pocket of his heavy shirt, a small buckskin bag, poured out into his hand some yellow scales and chips and small nuggets, and then returned them to the bag.

The bag must have held, at a rough guess, five hundred dollars' worth of gold.

"Better go and hide it," telegraphed Susan. "We do not know what may happen."

The dwarf went around back of the house, and soon returned without the bag.

"It is safe now," he said in his manner of speaking.

Suddenly his face assumed an alert look, and he threw himself down, with his ear to the ground.

"Somebody coming?" asked Susan, as he looked up.

He nodded.

"It is father, of course."

Cæsar shook his head as if that might be a matter of doubt.

"Is there more than one?" she asked, impatiently.

"Only one."

"It must be father, then. Let us go and meet him."

They hastened to the western edge of the plateau, but had not reached it when they were confronted by a man who had just come up the trail.

He was not Timothy Marlow, but a tall and fine-looking young man, whom Susan, who had previously seen him at a little distance, at once recognized as Burch Blanton, the mining engineer, who had seemed to be well acquainted with her father.

As Blanton courteously raised his hat, Cæsar looked to his mistress for instructions, but got none.

Indeed, there was an evident blush on her face, and she showed no disposition to order the intruder off the premises.

"I supposed it was my father who was coming up the trail," she explained. "I would not have thought of meeting a stranger here, especially at this hour."

"I wish for your sake that it was your father," answered Blanton. "To explain my presence here I must confess that I lost my way and became completely bewildered. Seeing a trail, I followed it, in the hope that it might lead me to a habitation, and it brought me here. My name is Burch Blanton, and I am connected with the new mining company at Topnotch."

"You are a friend of my father's, I believe," observed Susan.

"If your father is Timothy Marlow, I am proud to call myself his friend. He is a man whom I admire greatly, and who has kindly rendered me much service."

"And so you have lost your way. We could easily tell you how to get to Topnotch; but, it is nearly dark, and you might lose your way again. We are every minute expecting my father to come home, and perhaps he would be of more use to you than we could be."

"If I can stay here until your father comes home, I shall be glad to do so."

"You must be hungry, too, Mr. Blanton. Perhaps you had better go to the house and have supper with us. I am sure that my father will be glad to see you here."

Susan Marlow was by no means sure of the truth of the statement which she made so confidently, as it was probable that if her father had wished to see his friend at his home he would have brought him there.

She was obliged to admit to herself, however, that she was glad to see the young man, and a poor excuse was better than none.

The two young people walked back to the cabin, Cæsar following a little behind them.

He had never met Burch Blanton before, and supposed him to be a stranger to Susan, but whatever she chose to do was right in Cæsar's eyes.

"I should think your father would feel uneasy at leaving you here alone," said Blanton, after a little talk concerning the beauty and healthfulness of the location.

"Cæsar and I believe that we are well able to take care of ourselves," answered Susan.

"We have never yet been tried; but we are not afraid."

"He looks as if he might be a good guard;

but he might not prove to be sufficient if any real danger should come."

"I am not a bad fighter myself," she remarked. "When your friend Mr. Marvel was up here, he was attacked by Deadwood Dave, down there in the glen, and I drove the big bully off at the muzzle of my rifle."

"Was Marvel up here? He never said a word to me about it."

"I told him not—that is, I supposed that he would not care to talk about such an adventure, and I suggested to him that he need not mention it to anybody."

The engineer felt a twinge of the same sort of jealousy that had troubled Simon Marvel when Susan Marvel asked him about Burch Blanton.

If he had known that Simon had been sent away, with an intimation that he need not trouble himself to call again, Blanton might have felt easier.

"If father does not come soon," Susan announced, "we must have supper without him."

Then she telegraphed to Cæsar that he might go inside and look after matters there.

Instead of doing so he threw himself down again and laid his ear on the ground.

As his sense of hearing appeared to be quite undeveloped, it was to be supposed that the earth conveyed to him in some mysterious manner the information which he surely derived from it when he was in that position.

He started up with a look of alarm and anxiety on his hairy face.

"Is it not father, then?" eagerly inquired Susan.

"No," answered Cæsar's rapid fingers. "More than one. Maybe four or five men coming."

"That does look like danger, Mr. Blanton, Cæsar says that there are four or five men coming up here. Get the rifles, Cæsar!"

It was curious to see how she spoke to herself or to another, and then used the sign language in addressing the dwarf.

"If there is danger, I am glad that I am here to help you," declared Blanton. "It is true that I have only my revolver; but I can make good use of that."

Cæsar brought out two rifles, but returned into the cabin at an order from his mistress.

He reappeared with a third rifle, which she handed to Blanton.

In the prowess of this tall young man, and in his willingness to fight in her defense, she had a confidence which Simon Marvel could never have begun to inspire.

"It is a seven-shooter," said she. "Do you understand it?"

"Thoroughly. We three with such weapons ought to be an easy match for four or five men."

"Yes, in a fair fight; but there are rascals about Topnotch who are capable of any meanness."

In spite of Blanton's remonstrances, she led the way to the western edge of the plateau; but their enemies, if they were enemies, had already mounted the steep, and put in an appearance.

It was night then, but not a dark night, as there was moonlight enough to make the entire plateau distinctly visible.

Yes, they were surely enemies.

Burch Blanton recognized the burly form and coarse features of Deadwood Dave, and so did Susan Marlow.

With him were three others, the chief members of his gang and his almost constant companions.

They had reasonably supposed that the four of them would be sufficient to easily overcome and capture one girl; but it was another matter when they found themselves confronted by three opponents.

It was true that one of the three was a woman, and another was a dwarf; but women and dwarfs may be dangerous foes when they have rifles and know how to use them.

"Halt, there!" ordered Blanton in his clear and commanding tones. "Who are you, and what do you want here?"

There was no answer; but the four toughs huddled together, and seemed to be consulting.

"That won't do at all," decided Susan. "We must order them off and drive them away, or they will be playing some sneaking and cowardly trick."

Blanton was quite of her opinion, and acted on it at once.

"Clear out!" he shouted. "I know you for a set of scoundrels, and you have no business here. Clear out, or we will shoot you down!"

He and Susan leveled their rifles, and Cæsar, who was closely watching every movement they made, followed their example.

Instead of obeying the order, the toughs sidled about and separated, as if to divide the fire of the three, and possibly to flank them.

As the engineer shouted another warning, a shot was fired by one of them, and the bullet whizzed by his ear.

He fired immediately, and a howl from one of the toughs told him that his shot had counted.

Just then, as Susan Marlow and Cæsar were about to open fire on the intruders, there was a new and startling development.

A tall man suddenly appeared, as if he had come up the trail, and savagely attacked the assailants with a long stick.

His appearance and manner were sufficient, without the sound of his peculiar and well-known voice, to cause him to be recognized as Timothy Marlow.

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" he shouted. "Scatter, ye scoundrels! You did not know that I was on your track; but I tell you that nothing you do or think of doing is hid from me. Scatter, ye scoundrels! Hunt your holes, ye coyotes! Begone, before Satan gets hold of me and tempts me to murder you!"

They did scatter, running as if for their lives, fairly tumbling over each other in their haste to get down the trail, the wounded man half-limping and half-falling in the rear of the pack, and leaving a trail of blood behind him.

The Mad Parson stepped quickly to where his daughter and her friends were standing, and looked inquisitively at Blanton, who hastened to explain his presence there as he had explained it to Susan.

Doubtless Mr. Marlow considered this explanation rather "thin," as he glanced quizzically at the explainer.

"It is strange," he said, "that such a man as you should become bewildered and lose his way. I would scarcely have believed it possible. Have you had supper, Susie?"

"Not yet, father."

"Come and eat with us, Mr. Blanton, and then I will put you on your way home, so that you cannot miss it."

During the meal, which the engineer enjoyed greatly, Mr. Marlow made no allusion to the recent invasion of the plateau, but spoke only of the new mining company, the growth of Topnotch, and other indifferent matters.

After supper he led Blanton down the trail, and accompanied him a considerable distance.

Having gone as far as was necessary to enable the young engineer to find his way home, Mr. Marlow halted and spoke to him seriously, fastening his lurid eyes upon him with an earnest and intent gaze.

"You are a fine young man," said he. "You have plenty of brains and energy and industry, and your habits seem to be good. I hope you are also honest."

"I believe I am honest," answered Blanton.

"I have never been accused of being otherwise."

"I believe you are honest, too, and you may come up here again if you want to."

"Thank you, Mr. Marlow."

"Good-night. Keep to the right when the trail forks, and you will soon get home."

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAILING FOR GOLD.

DEADWOOD DAVE's plan for the capture of Susan Marlow had been tried after the apparent failure of Sandy McGuckin's scheme to intimidate the mine-owners.

It is here called an apparent failure, because the officers of the mining company had shown no disposition to allow themselves to be intimidated.

The threatening and blackmailing letter had been duly concocted and written by Sandy with the assistance of his Hebrew confederate, had been signed with an ominous skull and bones, had contained a direction that the answer should be sent to the care of Bart McGinley, and had been forwarded by mail to the superintendent of the mine.

No answer had been received, and the conspirators were left to infer that the mine-owners either regarded them as beneath their notice, or were secretly endeavoring to discover the writer of the letter.

In view of these discouraging circumstances, the next best thing was to try Deadwood Dave's plan, which seemed to be both feasible and easy.

The unexpected presence of Burch Blanton, and the arrival of Topnotch Tim, had caused the attempt to end in disaster, all that any of them got out of it being a bad wound in the leg, which Sandy McGuckin had difficulty in carrying home.

His wound would be likely to lay him up a few weeks, and during that time his comrades would have to care for him, as well as to lack his aid.

The big fellow duly reported the failure of his attempt to Dan Lasher, who was discouraged, but not disheartened.

He sneered at the account that was rendered to him, and readily accused his tool of incompetency.

"It seems to be a solemn and serious fact," said he, "that you and your crowd are afraid of the man you call Topnotch Tim. This is not the first time, as I have learned, that he has driven you before him like a flock of sheep. If he was the devil, or a ghost, he could not scare you any more."

"Thar's somethin' mighty queer about him," insisted Dave.

"There is something very queer about you, that makes you scare so easily, and I am afraid that you are a set of cowards."

"How could he ha' found out that we was goin' up thar, Mr. Lasher, so's to foller our trail and strike us jest when he got ready?"

"Bah! A man with a stick! You would be afraid of your own shadow."

"But thar was others up thar—two men with the girl."

"There it is again!" exclaimed handsome Jack. "That is worse, if anything, than your cowardice. You are too careless to conduct such an affair. You don't seem to have a bit of forethought. If you were going to steal a horse, now—"

"What! Me steal a horse?"

"You needn't get angry, I was only supposing a case. If you were going to steal a horse, for instance, would you not carefully look about, to make sure that nobody was guarding or watching the horse?"

"Reckon I would, if I was goin' to steal a hoss."

"Yes, you would spy out the surroundings closely, to make sure that you were safe. When you want to steal a woman, ought you not to be at least as careful as when you steal a horse—that is, I mean, if you were going to steal a horse?"

"I reckon we orter been more keeful than we was, Cap."

"Indeed you ought. You roughed into that business like a fool. You should have made sure that she was alone and unprotected. You have lost a good chance by your carelessness and you may never get such another."

"Thar's another scheme we're goin' to try, Cap. We've been plannin' it out for some time, and we mean to work it keefully."

"To get the girl?"

"To worry Topnotch Tim. He's got a diggin's somewhar in the hills, and it must be mighty rich, as he has brought an abundance of gold to town. Our scheme is to foller him when he goes out thar, find the diggins, and chouse him out of it."

"That is a good scheme, Dave, if it can be made to work. But you may meet him, and then he will scare you out of your wits and drive you back to town!"

"Not this time, I reckon. We've had enough of that."

"Suppose, Dave, that you should fail to find the diggins, but should find the man you call Topnotch Tim, and suppose, then, that instead of letting him scare you to death, you should just knock him down and tie him well, and put him in a safe place."

"What sort of a safe place? I'd be afeard to kill him, and that's a fact."

"Put him where I can get hold of him, and I will attend to the rest of the business. I will pay you as much for that as if you got the girl."

"It's a go, Cap. Whether we find the diggin's or not, we'll do that very thing. It'll be a durned good trick to git him out of the way, anyhow."

"You will need some help, as one of your gang is laid up. Get two men who are not likely to be afraid of Topnotch Tim, and I will furnish the money to pay them."

"That's correct. Whar's the money?"

"You are ready enough for that part of the business. But you shall see that I mean to be liberal."

Handsome Jack handed his tool another sum of money, and accompanied it with a parting injunction:

"I want you to earn this, Dave, as well as to spend it. I pay well for good work, but insist upon getting what I pay for. I know your style, and I give you fair warning that I will stand no trifling."

"I ain't arter no triflin', Cap. I'll do the best I can."

"Go on and do it, then."

Deadwood Dave left the presence of his somewhat imperious employer, fully determined to do the best he could in the matter that had been committed to his charge, as he was pretty well convinced that it would not be safe for him to do anything else.

Aaron Isaacs had already been sneaking and spying about Topnotch Tim's place up the mountain, carefully noting the old man's outgoings and incomings, and he was of the opinion that he had "got it down pretty fine."

Since the attempt to capture his daughter, Mr. Marlow had remained at home and about home much more closely than before, as he perceived that it was really dangerous to leave Susie there alone.

He never went out at night any more, and that was one point which Dan Lasher had gained by the attempt that failed, as the Mad Parson did not visit his establishment to get contributions from the faro-bank for the new Baptist church.

When he had sneaked and spied as much as he thought necessary, Isaacs informed his comrades of the proper time to begin operations, and they prepared themselves as if for a desperate enterprise.

Deadwood Dave had found no difficulty in securing two available men, who were glad of the chance to get good pay for doing crooked work.

The party of five reached Topnotch Tim's home a few hours before noon, as they wished to miss no chances.

Though the old man was rather irregular in his habits, Aaron Isaacs had noticed that he usu-

ally left the plateau, and took the route that was supposed to lead to his diggin's, at either about ten o'clock in the morning, or shortly after noon.

Sometimes he went alone, and sometimes the dwarf went alone; but they never went together any more; one of them always remaining at the house.

Isaacs would have followed one of them, and would have endeavored to steal the discovery from his comrades; but he had been inspired with such a dread of Topnotch Tim, that he was unwilling to run the risk of encountering him alone.

The five toughs concealed themselves carefully where they could see any person who came down from the plateau, and waited as patiently as they could, but not without a certain degree of nervousness and uneasiness, as Topnotch Tim had declared that nothing they did or thought of doing could be hid from him.

They were as determined as they could be, however, that they would not allow him to scare them off the track this time, or to get the better of them in any way.

Fortunately for their nerves and their peace of mind, they were not obliged to wait long for their quarry.

It was a little after ten o'clock, as they judged by the sun, when the Mad Parson came down the trail that led from the plateau.

When he reached the bottom of the ravine, he looked around, as if to make sure that nobody was in sight or watching him.

Then he crossed a ridge, and turned his steps northward and upward.

Aaron Isaacs, who was regarded as the best trailer and the most accomplished sneak of the party, had been detailed to follow the old man as closely as he could, the others keeping at a little distance behind the scout, but within signaling reach.

The Mad Parson led them a difficult chase.

At that locality the mountain was a series of hills and hollows, ridges and ravines, rugged, but rising gradually, and beyond the tangle towered Topnotch Peak, which was supposed to be inaccessible.

Up and down went the leader, now lost to sight, and again visible on a height, but always pressing forward in one direction, as if he had a known and definite point to reach.

It was fortunate for the toughs that he never turned and looked backward, as he might have caught sight of Aaron, who was at times incautious in his eagerness to keep the quarry in sight.

Isaacs hurried on, stopping only now and then to signal to his comrades, until he reached the crest of a steep and sharp ridge, when he halted and beckoned to his friends as if imploring them to make haste.

They did make haste, and all four were quite breathless when they reached the crest of the ridge.

When they got there, they found Isaacs looking disappointed and perplexed, as if the affair had not turned out to please him.

"It is the queerest thing," said he. "I don't know what to make of it. He came up the ridge, and stopped a moment right here. Then he went down. He must have gone down, as I would have seen him if he had gone either way on the ridge. I hurried up here, and signaled to you, and that is the last of him."

At the foot of the ridge was a gully which might well be called a gulch, it was so deep and narrow, and beyond it rose the rugged mountain-side that reached up to Topnotch Peak.

"Mebbe he got out o' sight afore you'd climbed the ridge," suggested Deadwood Dave.

"How could he?" answered Isaacs. "I've kept him in sight when the chances were worse than this. If he had gone either up or down the gulch there, I must have seen him, unless the devil shot him out of sight."

"I reckon that is jest what's the matter," observed Bad Lands Ben. "If it ain't the devil, it is somebody in the almighty line o' business who helps him."

"That's all durned nonsense," said Isaacs. "Let's go down into the gulch and see if we can get sight or trace of him?"

They descended the steep side of the ledge, finding the descent pretty difficult, and looked up and down the gulch and all about them, but saw nothing of the Mad Parson, and could not find the slightest trail or trace to show that any person had been there.

CHAPTER IX.

STALKING BIG GAME.

THE five toughs were so badly discouraged by their discovery, that they were obliged to treat the disappearance of Topnotch Tim as a conundrum, and give it up.

They sought up and down the gulch, and looked carefully among the rocks and hollows, but saw no sign of him.

He had disappeared as suddenly and completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him.

As he had unquestionably disappeared, and as it was useless to search for his alleged "diggins" without his leadership, the toughs sadly climbed back to the crest of the ridge, where

they sat down and considered the affair as calmly as they could.

It was the opinion of most of them that there must be something supernatural about the Mad Parson, and they found their fear of him quite as strong as ever.

These notions were strongly combated by one of the new recruits, known as English Bill, who declared that the Mad Parson did not differ from ordinary men, except in being more "cute," and in trading on the fears he had inspired.

"Thar's somethin' more that we can do," said Deadwood Dave, who thought it time to bring out the idea which he had received from Dan Lasher, and which he had not previously ventilated.

"Thar's somethin' more that we can do, and somethin' that'll put a pile of money in our pockets."

"What's that?" inquired Isaacs.

"If we can ketch the old cuss, and bundle him up, and put him whar a friend of mine can git hold of him, I can promise that every man who has a hand in the job will be well paid for it."

As Dan had lately been furnishing the money for the gang, and as it was understood that it had come from that friend of his, his statement commanded instant attention.

English Bill, who came to the front as the stanchest and most fearless of the conspirators, was greatly taken by this idea when it was further explained, and enforced his views with such vehemence and earnestness that he compelled the others to agree with him.

"If you fellers are afeard of Topnotch Tim," said he, "jest put me forrard to nab him, and you'll soon see that thar hain't nothin' to skeer at."

"It looks as if it mought be an easy game to play," observed Deadwood Dave. "He is bound to go back by the way he came, and he can't get up thar whar he lives, except as he came down. So all we've got to do is to hide as we hid afore, and ketch him on the wing, as a feller may say."

"And when we've caught him," suggested Isaacs, "maybe we can force him to tell where he gets his gold."

"Thar's somethin' in that, too. Leave you alone, Ikey, to keep your head sot onto the gold. Well, fellers, it looks to be a good scheme, and we must work it fur all it's worth."

In order to work it for all it was worth, they took the back track to the ravine at the western end of the plateau, and concealed themselves there as they had before.

There was a little difference, however, as it had been tacitly agreed among them that English Bill should be the nearest to the trail, so that he might be the first to make the dash at their expected prey.

The scheme did not work near as well as they had hoped it would, because they had to wait a long time for Topnotch Tim.

Hunger did not oppress them, but thirst did, as they were unaccustomed to going so long without their regular drinks.

They had liquor, but it had been agreed that they were to touch it very lightly until they had made an end of their business, and Deadwood Dave, who was the commissary of the party, and who was very anxious to get hold of more of Dan Lasher's money, dealt out the fluid in light rations, just enough to keep his comrades from grumbling too hard.

Timothy Marlow, in the mean time, had been by no means unaware of the fact that he was followed, and had governed himself accordingly.

He had led his sneaking pursuers not to the point which they had wished to reach, but in the direction in which he chose to take them, and, when he had fooled them enough, he had disappeared by concealing himself in a hole in the rock, which was almost sure to be overlooked, even by the most careful searchers.

It was not until after he had gone to the place toward which he originally started, and when he believed that his enemies had entirely abandoned the search for his trail and gone away, that he set out to return home.

In returning, he did not take the route by which he had led his pursuers, and yet, as Deadwood Dave had said, there was only one way by which he could reach the plateau, and that was by the trail which led up from the ravine.

It was twilight when he got there, and he was not suspecting any danger, as he believed that the men who had been following him had long since abandoned their attempt and returned home.

That, however, was just what they had not done.

Though the hours of waiting had been very tedious, and though some of them had dozed where they were hid, and others had fretted and worried, they were still there, ready and anxious to earn the money that Dan Lasher had promised them through Deadwood Dave.

As the old man passed close to where English Bill was concealed, that conspirator had a fine opportunity to "nab him," and used it most effectively.

Jumping out from his concealment as soon as

his prey had passed him, he seized the Mad Parson by the arms from behind, at the same time jamming his knee into the victim's back, and calling upon his comrades for assistance.

They came promptly, the energetic action of English Bill having nerved them for the work, and the five toughs had no difficulty in subduing the tall old man.

The sudden attack had surprised him so that he lost control of himself for a moment, and then his only chance was gone, though he tried hard to free himself from the clutch of his enemies.

It was the pressure of English Bill's knee against the small of his back that did more than anything else to subdue him, causing him to be easily thrown to the ground.

As soon as possible his assailants gagged him, to prevent him from uttering cries that might be heard at his home, and they also hastened to tie him hand and foot.

But, Timothy Marlow had no idea of uttering any cries; for, who would they bring to his help, if anybody?

His daughter, of course, and he wanted to keep her clear of the danger which she would incur by rushing to his rescue.

She and Caesar might be able to take care of themselves; but they need not be involved in his difficulties.

So he ceased to struggle when resistance was useless, and calmly awaited the further development of the outrage.

No doubt Deadwood Dave and his gang, whom he had at once recognized, intended to injure him, and he well knew that he had given them ample cause for enmity; but what did they mean to do with him?

Part of their purpose was speedily made apparent.

They were going to take him to some place where they could operate upon him at their leisure, without being molested.

Leaving him in charge of Ben Staples and English Bill's partner, the others had a quiet consultation concerning him.

"What are we goin' to do with him now?" inquired the man who had led the attack.

"That's all a-settin'," answered Deadwood Dave. "I've studied this thing up, and have got it all down fine. Thar's an old cabin a little off the trail, on the way down the mountain, and we can shut him up thar, as tight as if he was in the Topnotch jail, until I can let my man know whar to find him."

"But we want to squeeze the truth out of him about his diggin's," suggested Isaacs.

"Well, I dunno about that. My man wants him delivered in good order, and I reckon he won't pay for a damaged article. We'll have to be kinder keeful of him."

Their carefulness just then consisted in untying his legs, so that he could walk, and marching him a way, one at each elbow, one in front, and the other two bringing up the rear of the procession.

Thus they marched until they had got about half-way down the trail to Topnotch, when they turned to the right, and halted at a deserted cabin about a quarter of a mile from the trail.

CHAPTER X.

THE RESULT—ASHES.

THE cabin which Deadwood Dave had fixed upon as a temporary prison for the Mad Parson had been the home of a miner who had abandoned it after he had failed to find a fortune in the Topnotch Hills.

It was in a secluded, out-of-the-way spot, where nobody went any more, not even a prospector or a hunter, and was therefore well adapted to the purpose for which it was wanted.

It was solidly though rudely built, and still had a stout door, and there was no window opening by which a prisoner might possibly escape.

Topnotch Tim was escorted into the bare and unfurnished room, and was informed that he might seat himself on the floor if he wished to, or might walk about if he chose, but could on no account be permitted to get out.

"What have you brought me here for?" he calmly inquired when his gag had been removed.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"We've got you foul now," replied the big ruffian, "and we mean to work you fur all you're worth, and make you pay fur the new and the old."

"If I owe anything, I am always ready to settle, and you may produce the bill as soon as you please."

"Whar's your diggin's, then? That's what we want to know."

"My diggin's? I don't know what you mean by my diggin's."

"You don't, hey? You're gittin' to be mighty innocent in your old age. I make no doubt that you do know jest what I mean. Your diggin's is the place whar you git your gold, and we mean to make you tell us whar it is, if we have to squeeze the daylight out of you."

The Mad Parson smiled, as if he considered this statement mildly humorous; but the light that flashed from his dark eyes was more lurid than ever.

"I always supposed you to be a big fool,"

said he; "but you seem to be getting more silly than ever. If I had any such diggin's as you speak of, you may be sure that no amount of compulsion would persuade me to give it away to you. You might kill me, but would still be as ignorant as you are now."

"We'll see about that. If we don't find a way to make you tell us what we want to know, you may burn me for a fool, and waste no fire-wood."

"I hope you are not going to starve me. You would gain nothing by that. I should have had my supper before now."

This was an important consideration, which had already impressed itself forcibly upon the toughs.

They had brought nothing to eat, and the amount of whisky they carried was not sufficient for their needs.

Deadwood Dave went outside with his comrades, shutting his prisoner up in the cabin, and consulted with them concerning the situation.

He was very anxious to get back to Topnotch as soon as possible, mainly for the purpose of informing Dan Lasher of the capture, and turning the prisoner over to the man who was willing to pay for him.

The others had various reasons, mostly connected with whisky, for wishing to return to town—that is, all of them except English Bill, who declared that he was both willing and able to hold the fort and guard the prisoner, until they could come back and relieve him.

This simplified matters at once, and gave the four the chance for which they were longing.

After assuring the captive that something to eat would be provided for him as soon as possible, Deadwood Dave and his three comrades set out on their return to Topnotch, leaving English Bill to guard the cabin.

In the course of time they reached the rejuvenated town, finding it lighted up as it always was at night, and just then at the height of its gayety and excitement.

Cautioning the others to go slow, to touch the intoxicating fluid lightly, and to be ready to return with him to the hills at a moment's notice, the big ruffian hastened to carry his important news to Dan Lasher.

He found the gambler dealing faro, and made him a signal, which was at once understood.

Indeed, his excited manner and his air of importance was enough to inform Handsome Dan that he had something of interest to communicate.

Dan summoned an assistant to take his place at the box, and led his tool to a corner where they could confer privately.

"I've got him," excitedly whispered Dave. "Got your friend, Topnotch Tim? Is that what you mean?"

"That's jest it. We've got him."

"And how did you get him?"

"Jest laid fur him, jumped on him, and gobbled him up."

"You did not hurt him, I hope."

"Nary hurt."

"Where is he now?"

"Shut tight in a cabin up yonder and well guarded. He is safe, you may bet your head, and he is yours, to do with as you please."

Dan Lasher was silent for a moment, looking puzzled and abstracted, as if he had got an elephant on his hands, and did not know what to do with it.

"Do you think he will be safe there for a while—perhaps for two or three days?" he inquired.

"He is safe enough thar now," answered Davy, "and it'll be easy enough to keep him safe, as you're willin' to pay well."

"I am glad of that, as I have been so busy that I have not settled on any place where I could put him. Of course I pay well, and you know that."

"That's what I told the boys."

"Well, you need not be always reminding me of it. You will get your money."

"Say, Cap," queried Dave, who was struggling with a weighty problem. "What sort of a grudge have you got against the old cuss?"

"Don't you know that he came into my place on the opening night, and sung and preached and prayed against my business, and then beat me out of two thousand dollars, and said that it was my contribution to the Baptist church?"

"Yes, I know that; but I allowed that he jest had a lucky streak fur that once."

"Don't you know that he threatened to keep on coming? He would have done it too, if it had not been that something of more importance to himself kept him back."

"Is that all the grudge you've got ag'inst him Cap?"

"Look here, Dave. What-you-call-him, you are much too inquisitive about my affairs. If you don't drop that style of thing, I will have to choke you off, and I know just how to do the trick. If I have any other grudge against the person you speak of, that is my business, not yours."

"All right, Cap. I allowed that mebbe I mought help you—that's all."

"When I want your help, I will let you know. What I pay you for is to do my work and hold your tongue."

Dan Lasher should have known that such a big worm as Deadwood Dave may turn when it is trodden on.

That particular worm did not turn just then, but looked as if the weather might become somewhat sultry for Handsome Dan, if the worm should ever happen to get on top of him.

"I won't be likely to keep him there long, observed the gambler. "Indeed, I may get through with him to-night."

"If you do, what then?" eagerly inquired Dave.

"What then? Why, that's all."

"Not quite all, Cap. When you git through with him, suppose you turn him over to us fellers."

"What do you want him for?"

"We've got a grudge ag'inst him, too, and we want to make him tell us whar the diggin's is that he gets his gold from."

"If you ever make that man squeal, David, you will do something that I don't believe anybody capable of doing. Well, you will be welcome to him when I am through with him. Come, now, we will go right up there. Where are your partners?"

"They're handy. I can git holt of them right away."

"Have them ready at McGinley's, then, within half an hour, and we will start from there."

Deadwood Dave hastened to obey the orders of his employer, and Handsome Dan made some preparations that were a little peculiar.

He opened a trunk and took out a package of papers, from which he selected a few and put them in his pocket. He also provided himself with two revolvers and a belt of cartridges.

Then he went to McGinley's saloon, where Deadwood Dave had with some difficulty got his followers in working order, with the exception of English Bill's partner, who was already too drunk to be of any further service to the combination.

Such as the gang was, it was acceptable to Dan Lasher, who accompanied them up the mountain trail, Deadwood Dave taking the lead, and looking as important as if he carried the entire enterprise upon his shoulders.

It was a tedious tramp at night, and Dan was not the only one of the party who felt that he would be glad when it was ended.

When they reached the point where they left the trail to go to the cabin, Ben Staples sniffed and declared that he smelt smoke, and others smelt it too.

"Somebody has been settin' the woods afire," remarked Dave; "but that hain't got nuthin' to do with us."

It was not until they reached the place where they had left their prisoner that they discovered that it had something to do with them.

They stopped suddenly, with various ejaculations of amazement and anger, mostly profane.

"What's the matter?" inquired the gambler.

"It's gone," answered Dave, who seemed to be quite stupefied.

"What is gone?"

"The cabin we shut him up in. It is burnt down. Come and see."

Going on a little further, they came to the site of the cabin.

Nothing was to be seen there but a pile of ashes and a few smoldering logs.

"It's all burnt up," said Dave, "and Topnotch Tim has been burnt up with it."

"I am not so sure of that," remarked Dan Lasher. "You know that he is very smart, and I have heard you say that the devil or something else helps him."

Making a light, they examined the ruins carefully, and soon discovered the body of a man near the edge, partly covered by ashes and charred wood.

It was burned beyond the possibility of recognition, and they gathered about it and wondered who it was.

"I don't think it is tall enough for the old man," said Lasher. "Perhaps it is the chap you left in charge here."

"How could it be him?" demanded Dave. "He was outside, and t'other was inside. English Bill could git away from the fire easy enough, and Topnotch Tim couldn't."

Yet there was no means of identification remaining, and the truth was left to conjecture.

After puzzling themselves about it a while, the party returned to Topnotch.

CHAPTER XI.

A SCARE AND A SEARCH.

CÆSAR, the dwarf, had remained at the house on the plateau with Susan Marlow when her father went into the hills.

Whatever the object of the Mad Parson's expedition may have been, he surely knew he was followed, and it was highly probable that he believed he had baffled his pursuers.

For once, at least, his calculations were made in vain, and the result proved that even he could be easily trapped.

When he was caught he might, by a cry, have summoned his daughter and Cæsar, and there

can be no doubt that they would have worried his adversaries to some purpose; but he was unwilling to involve them in his difficulties, always believing that he could easily extricate himself.

Yet they were bound to miss him in the course of time, and it may be supposed that they would have preferred a little peril to a good deal of anxiety.

Since the attack by Deadwood Dave and his fellow-toughs, either Mr. Marlow or Cæsar had always remained at home with Susan, and her father trusted the dwarf almost as fully as he trusted himself.

At least, there could be no doubt of Cæsar's courage and fidelity.

His inability to hear and speak was of course a drawback to his usefulness; but the sense of hearing seemed to have been to a considerable extent merged in the senses of seeing and feeling, which had become so intensified that they often seemed to take the place of the lost sense.

When Mr. Marlow was expected to return from his expedition, Susan was seated in front of the cabin with her sewing, and the dwarf was there also, both looking and listening for the father and friend.

Suddenly Cæsar threw himself down in his usual style, with his ear to the ground, as if he could hear what was going on at a distance, and arose with a look of alarm and anxiety.

"Is it not father?" she asked with her fingers.

Cæsar shook his head, and indicated that there were, in his opinion, several people in the ravine or thereabout.

"Are they going to try it again?" she demanded, as the circumstances brought to her mind the previous attack.

The dwarf thought that they were about to try it again, and he so expressed himself in his way.

"Bring the rifles, then," she ordered.

He brought two rifles, and they considered themselves prepared for an emergency.

Before starting toward the west end of the plateau to meet the expected attack, Cæsar threw himself down and laid his ear to the ground again.

This time his hairy face expressed surprise when he arose.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"They are not there," he telegraphed. "They must have gone away."

"Perhaps father has come along and scared them off."

The dwarf shook his head sadly, as if he considered that an improbable supposition.

If Mr. Marlow had really done what Susan suggested, he ought by that time to have been there with them; but neither her listening, nor Cæsar's more acute sense of feeling, could then detect the presence of any person near by.

"At least there is no danger," she said. "We will put the rifles away, and will wait for father."

They did wait, and their apprehensions increased as the time passed by, and the expected one did not return to them.

The hour for his return had been fixed when he went away, and when it had long since passed, but he had not come, the conviction was forced upon them that something had happened to him, and of course the something must involve peril.

Though they knew that he was accounted crazy, they also knew the limitations of his mental disease, and were well aware of the fact that as far as they were concerned, he had never broken his word or failed to keep his appointments.

"Are you sure that there were several men down there?" Susan Marlow asked Cæsar.

Yes, he was sure.

"If they had meant to attack us again, and father had come and driven them off, as he did before, we would have seen him here long before now. I am afraid, Cæsar, that they may have been lying in wait for him, knowing that there was but one way by which he would be likely to come up here, and may have done him some great harm."

The dwarf's look showed that the same apprehensions had taken hold of him.

"Let us go and seek him," his busy fingers said.

Susan Marlow was quite as eager to go as Cæsar was, and the start was speedily made.

The house was closed and locked as well as it could be, and they took their rifles and sallied forth, descending at the west end of the plateau into the ravine below.

No person was there, and no sign of a recent encounter or disturbance of any kind was visible.

Then it was that another of Cæsar's senses came into play—one of those which helped to atone to him for the lack of speech and hearing.

He got down on all-fours, and snuffed about the ground like a hunting-dog.

"He was here," he telegraphed to Susan.

"Then they have got him," her fingers said sadly. "It was just about the time when he was to have come home that you felt those people down here. They have captured him and carried him away. Is there any chance to follow them?"

Cæsar, who had been listening intently with his eyes, put down his head again, and smelt about vigorously, apparently endeavoring to distinguish and separate the various human scents about there.

After a while he struck the trail of Deadwood Dave's party, and beckoned to Susan.

She took the two rifles, and left him free to follow the scent as well as he could.

There was much of the dog about him, but more of the man—not enough of either for the full attainment of the end he had in view.

He struck the trail pretty much as a dog might strike it, but could not follow it as a dog might have followed it, his progress being slow and hesitating.

The darkness would have prevented the acutest trailer from tracking the steps of even so large a party, and the scent was evidently not sufficient for Cæsar.

Susan Marlow was in despair.

She stopped the dwarf, and asked him, holding her speaking fingers near his face, if he was sure that her father had been down in the ravine, and that he was there captured and carried away.

Cæsar could not be certain of all that; but he had no doubt, as he assured her, that there had been several men stirring in the ravine, and that they had speedily gone away.

If Mr. Marlow had not fallen in with them and been captured by them, he would have reached his home long before that hour, as he never failed to return when he promised to.

This was reasonable enough, and Susan permitted the dwarf to continue the quest, though she had no confidence in his success.

It took him into the trail that led to Topnotch and there he soon became utterly bewildered, as his sense of smell would not allow him to discriminate among the various people who had recently traveled that route.

"This is of no use," said Susan. "We will have to go home and wait for daylight."

But Cæsar was by no means ready to abandon the effort, and he went on down the trail, pausing now and then to sniff about, as if he suspected the men he was following of having turned off to the right or the left.

If Mr. Marlow had been captured, it was not at all likely that he would be taken to Topnotch, where he was well known, and it was reasonable to presume that his captors had some other destination.

Finally, however, the dwarf was compelled to confess that he was completely at fault.

He shook his head sadly, intimating that it would be useless to pursue the search any further.

"We must go home, then, and wait for daylight," said Susan. "To-morrow we will raise a party, and my father shall be hunted and found, no matter where he may be."

Again Cæsar threw himself down with his ear to the ground; but this time his face and manner were full of joyous excitement when he arose.

"What is it?" eagerly demanded Susan.

He gave the sign which he used to indicate her father.

"That is too good news to be true," said she; but it was true nevertheless.

In a few moments the tall form of Timothy Marlow came striding up the trail, and then his daughter was clasped in his embrace.

CHAPTER XII.

THROUGH FIRE TO FREEDOM.

"WE were afraid that we had lost you, father," said Susan Marlow when her first transport of joy had subsided.

"We were terribly afraid that we had lost you, as Cæsar was sure that you had been waylaid down in the ravine, and carried off by a party of men."

"Cæsar was right," answered the old man as he patted the ungainly dwarf on the head.

"He was quite right about that, as he always is when his wits are in good working order. I have had a rough experience; but you see I am safe out of the scrape."

"But your clothes have been on fire, father, and I can now see that your hair and beard are scorched. What does it mean?"

"We will go home, my dear, and get something to eat, as I am fearfully hungry, and then I will tell you all about it."

Not until he was safe at home, and had eaten a hearty supper, did Timothy Marlow begin to explain his recent mysterious absence.

Then he seated himself in a comfortable chair, lighted an unclerical pipe, and gave a full account of his abduction and escape.

Part of this the dwarf got hold of by watching intently the lips of his master and friend, and the rest was condensed into sign language for him by Susan.

The old man could not tell the whole story, however, as part of the occurrences that led to his escape were beyond his sight and hearing, and he could only guess at them from what he observed afterward.

The truth was that he owed much to the negligence of English Bill.

That tough citizen was in high feather when his comrades returned to Topnotch, and he had

never had a better opinion of himself than at that moment.

It was he who was responsible for the valuable capture that had been made; he who had come boldly to the front and borne the brunt of the business; he who had subdued the man who terrified the other toughs; he whose energetic and resolute action had encouraged them to come in and make the victory sure.

Therefore it was reasonable to presume that he should and would receive the greater portion of the reward that had been promised by the capitalist who was backing the scheme.

As he was the lion, he ought to have the lion's share.

It pleased him greatly to perceive that his comrades regarded him as the hero of the occasion, as they surely did, for they would not otherwise have been willing to leave him in sole charge of such a valuable captive.

The proof was plain that they trusted him implicitly, and he had not the faintest doubt that he was fully equal to the trust imposed upon him.

The man who had caught Topnotch Tim could keep him.

Having settled these points in his mind, he was at leisure to consider his personal condition and his creature comforts.

He felt the need of food, but rejoiced in the belief that he had a good substitute for something to eat in the shape of something to drink, possessing a flask of whisky of which he had not informed his comrades, and which he had consequently not been compelled to share with them.

This whisky would alleviate the pangs of hunger, would put him on the best possible terms with himself, and would be the best of company for him during his lonely vigil.

At least, that was the way he figured it up; but whisky has its own style of transacting business among those who fool with it.

Before touching the flask, English Bill attended to the door of the cabin, and made sure that it was stoutly fastened from the outside, so that his prisoner could not possibly escape.

Then he gave his attention to the whisky, and suffered the seductive fluid to gurgle down his throat.

It was some of Bart McGinley's hottest and fiercest man-killing compound, and its effects were usually sudden and severe.

English Bill had fully intended to touch it lightly; but one taste of the fiery fluid called for another, and it encroached upon him before he was fully aware of what he was doing.

As the potent stuff surged up into his brain and settled there, he soon became drowsy, and what was to hinder him from taking a nap before his comrades came back?

His prisoner was safe, and he was sleepy, and, as a matter of fact, he found himself unable to keep awake any longer.

He seated himself on the ground with his back against the cabin door, and soon his snores began to mingle loudly with the other "voices of the night."

Timothy Marlow in the mean time had kept wide awake and had become pretty well aware of the occurrences outside.

By listening at the crevices of the deserted cabin he had learned that all his captors but one had returned to Topnotch, and had formed a reasonably correct opinion of the purpose that had taken them away.

As soon as they had gone, the idea of escape came into his head, though not for the first time, and he went to work on it.

The first thing necessary was to free his limbs so that he could act effectively if he should find a chance for action.

His feet had been freed, so that he might walk to the cabin; but his hands were still tied behind his back, and he needed them badly.

He was not going to let them stay tied, if there was any way for him to turn himself loose, and he soon found a way.

Backing himself up against the wall, he thus explored the room in the darkness, and came across a three-cornered file that had been driven into one of the logs, probably to serve as a clothes peg.

It was a little high for his use; but he got his wrists up to it, and by dint of rapid work and scraping the skin from his knuckles against the log, he succeeded in making the file bite through the cord where it was knotted, and then he was soon free to stretch his arms and rub his hands, so as to get them ready for the work that lay before him.

He soon had it cut out, and began to see his way through the difficulty with some degree of clearness.

Listening at the front of the cabin, he heard very distinctly the snores of English Bill, and could guess what was the matter with him.

At least, he was sound asleep, and his slumber would give the prisoner a good chance to escape, if he could once get outside of the cabin.

The question was, though, how was he to get outside?

The logs were too heavy and stout to offer him any hope, and he had not even a knife in his pocket, that having been taken from him with his revolver when he was captured.

Feeling of the door in the darkness, he perceived that it would be equally impracticable, in the absence of tools, to do anything with that.

Yet he was not without resources.

He had a box of matches on his person, and his final conclusion was that, with those little pine sticks tipped with phosphorus, he must force his way to freedom.

Considered as weapons, they were not a bit formidable; but they might be very effective if judiciously used.

Timothy Marlow, in short, had decided upon burning his way out of the log-cabin.

This, however, was a serious matter, and one which demanded caution and circumspection.

It would be a very good thing to burn one's way out of a house, but quite another matter to burn one's self up in a house.

It would be useless to attack the logs, even in a corner, where they could best be got at, as the fire might be expected to smolder for a long time, and time was a point to be calculated on, as the men who had gone to Topnotch might be expected to return.

Moreover, it was to be presumed that the smoke would suffocate the prisoner before a way out could be opened for him.

He turned his attention to the door as his best chance.

It was passably solid, and of seasoned oak, but nothing like as solid as the logs.

If there was any chance, the door offered it, and that chance he was determined to try, though he was well aware of the risks he ran in attempting to burn his way out.

Using a few of his matches for lighting purposes, he found various combustibles in the empty room—a little straw from an old bed, some drawing-knife shavings, and several splinters and odds and ends of wood.

These he collected near the door, and dug a little hole at its base, so that the fire might catch it at the bottom, and then carefully placed the stuff in the hole, and lighted it with one of his matches.

It blazed up all right, and careful tendence soon made him sure that it would catch the door and do good work there; but the effect of the smoke and one other matter were points which were yet to be ascertained.

The prisoner was pleased to perceive that a good deal of the smoke found its way out through crevices in the roof and sides of the cabin.

No doubt there was enough to seriously incommode him, and the inconvenience was likely to grow greater, and perhaps to become dangerous; yet, if the worst came to the worst, he could put his face to the floor, and thus escape much of it.

The other point that troubled him was the presence of the guard outside, who, though he might then be asleep, would surely be awakened by the smoke and the fire.

As the prisoner had no weapons, not even as much as a stick, how could he hope to strive against an armed and alert adversary?

English Bill, however, was not to be easily awakened.

As the fire caught the oaken door, and it began to burn upward from the bottom, the smoke got into the nostrils of the man outside, and he began to grunt and groan and grumble, but without recovering possession of his senses.

It is not too much to say that Bart McGinley's whisky was "a deadener."

When the smoke was followed by the heat of the fire, English Bill became so uncomfortable that he fell forward and rolled over to get out of the way of it.

Yet he "took the tumble" a little too late, as the flame had already fastened on his clothing.

Timothy Marlow knew nothing of the trouble outside.

Though he knew the guard to be there, he merely wondered what had become of him, and fully expected soon to encounter him.

His thoughts were fully occupied with watching the chances for his own escape, and with preventing himself from being burned or smothered to death.

As the door burned upward, the logs also caught; but the prisoner did not care what became of the cabin, if he could get out.

He used his best efforts to increase the conflagration at that particular point, and had the satisfaction of seeing an opening made, though it was not yet sufficient to allow his exit.

Again and again he tried the crumbling door; but the fastenings on the outside still held it, and the smoke and heat were becoming terribly oppressive.

At last he threw himself against it with all the force of which he was capable—in fact, with the energy of despair.

The charred and blazing wood gave way, and fell outward with a rush of flame and sparks, and Timothy Marlow, carried forward by the force of his blow, tumbled out with it and upon it.

Feeling the flame in his hair, and knowing that his hands and face were scorched, he hastened to extricate himself from his perilous

position, and discovered that the fire had caught his clothing.

Throwing himself on the ground, he rolled over and over until he smothered the flame upon his person, and perceived that he was safe.

His first thought then was to look for the man who had been left to guard him, of whom he had not seen or heard anything since he was saluted by the snores at the outside of the cabin.

A faint moaning and feeble stirring under what looked like a pile of fire and cinders, attracted his attention, and he stepped forward to gaze upon a scene of horror.

When the fire was started at his back, English Bill was as soggy and stupid as if he had been drugged.

Indeed, the Bart McGinley whisky, when it did not have its fighting spurs on, usually acted as an opiate.

When he fell over, the fire that had caught his clothing attacked his body instantly, and in such a manner that, although he felt the flame severely, he was incapable of fighting it.

He could not even roll over, or do anything to prevent himself from being burnt to a crisp as he lay there, speechless and helpless.

Then the burning door fell on him, and his doom was quickly sealed, the faint moan and stir that Topnotch Tim had noticed telling only of his expiring agony.

With a stick the Mad Parson plucked away the blazing wood, but perceived at once that the man was beyond the reach of help.

There was nothing then for him to do but to consider his own safety, which could be best secured by getting away from the scene of his imprisonment.

By this time the logs had begun to burn freely, and the destruction of the cabin promised to be speedy and complete.

The blazing building lighted his way as his long strides carried him swiftly toward the Topnotch trail.

"Do you know who has been doing this?" inquired Susan, when her father had made an end of narrating his experience.

"Yes, I know the men who did the work, or most of them; but I do not know who is backing them."

"Backing them? What do you mean by that?"

"From some words they let drop, I concluded that there was somebody behind them, who was encouraging them to do what they did, and was probably paying them for it."

"Who can he be?"

"That is what I must find out."

CHAPTER XIII.

EL PASO PETE.

THE rejuvenation of Topnotch, as has been noted, necessarily caused a large increase of population, many of the new-comers being people who expected to profit by the needs or vices of a thriving camp.

Among the new-comers, as has also been noted, was Dan Lasher, whose coming created considerable excitement, and whose settlement in Topnotch was one of the most prominent facts connected with the town.

Later there was another arrival, and one that was scarcely less conspicuous and interesting.

This person was one whose coming had been heralded somewhat as that of Handsome Dan had been like the approach of a theatrical star.

Therefore he was expected, and, when he came into Topnotch by the short line stage from the valley, he was waited for by a large delegation of citizens and transient people.

He proved to be worthy of their regard, abundantly satisfying their curiosity.

A more picturesque person had never been seen in Topnotch, or one who better answered the popular conception of a hero.

In the first place, his name was El Paso Pete—a name which had not only reached that locality, but which carried with it a strong suggestion of Texan and Mexican possibilities.

He was dressed for that character, and he looked it in a manner to fully satisfy the expectations of those who were awaiting him.

He had the *calzoneros*, the jacket with bell buttons, the broad-brimmed sombrero, and even the lead or pewter images of saints, that betokened the Mexican.

Only an *escopete* could be needed to complete the character; but he evidently had too much sense to incur himself with so antiquated and useless a weapon, being equipped with a Winchester rifle, two handsome revolvers, and a full complement of cartridges in a double belt.

His attire was decidedly Mexican, but his arsenal was thoroughly Texan, and he appeared to be a pretty formidable compound of the two nationalities.

He seemed to be a young man—not over thirty—with a long and pointed mustache, a bland smile, eyes that had a sleepy expression, or the lack of any, and a figure that was near the perfection of youthful manhood.

Even if there had not been a disposition to lionize this picturesque personage from the moment of his arrival, he would speedily have become one of the most popular characters in Topnotch, as he at once set in to "make himself solid" with the citizens.

In this effort he was speedily and eminently successful.

He chucked a few dollars into the mouths of the tigers at Dan Lasher's and other places, but without committing himself to a combat with either of the beasts.

At the various saloons he was free with his money, treating frequently and liberally, but himself sampling the liquors with caution and moderation.

His modesty, though it might not have been so considered elsewhere, was something marvelous to the Topnotchers, in view of the reputation that had preceded him, and his statements concerning himself were not regarded as in the least degree boastful.

"I am El Paso Pete," he was wont to say, "and I am a chief where I come from. The Comanches hunt their holes when they hear of me, and the Greasers give me plenty of room. I own the field, and always cut a wide swath. I am not hunting any fights, and am as peaceable as a young lamb on a May morning; but, if any citizen about here wants to pick a quarrel with me, he can be accommodated with all he wants as soon as he can call for it."

Such extreme modesty on the part of so great a man was highly appreciated by the many admirers of El Paso Pete.

The toughs swarmed about him, but treated him deferentially, and the more substantial citizens, though they regarded him as a possible terror, were respectful and willing to be on good terms with him.

In the course of his peregrinations he "took in" Bart McGinley's juicery, and it must be admitted that he seemed to take unusual pains to make himself solid there, greatly to the delight of McGinley and his regular customers.

Deadwood Dave and his gang had been out of a job since the disastrous failure of their last attempt upon Topnotch Tim.

They were also out of money, the sums received from Dan Lasher having lasted them but a little while, and there being no more forthcoming from that quarter.

Handsome Dan had positively assured them that no further advance payments would be made; that he must have something to show for his money before he put it up.

As it had been clearly demonstrated to them, by the presence of Topnotch Tim in the flesh, and the continued absence of English Bill, that it was the latter individual who had been done away with by the burning of the cabin, the fact had discouraged them greatly.

As they could not understand how the unarmed prisoner had escaped, while the free man with weapons had perished, their belief in the possession of supernatural powers by the Mad Parson was strengthened, and their fear of him had become so great that they hastened to get out of sight if they happened to perceive him at a distance.

Sandy McGuckin had so far recovered from the effects of his wound that he was able to sit up in the bar-room with the others, and there was no longer any medical interdiction to prevent him from taking his regular or irregular drinks, if he could get them.

If he could get them—that was the sore point with Sandy, as well as with the rest of them, and they were all more than ever convinced of the truth of the old saying that "it takes money to buy whisky."

Consequently the advent of a stranger, and especially of such a personage as El Paso Pete, was regarded by them as a windfall of the first magnitude.

As he was the furthest possible remove from a tenderfoot, they could not hope to take anything from him, or to make anything out of him, except what he chose to give them; but he was surely a liberal chieftain, and it was very kind of him to extend his patronage to the McGinley juicery and continue it there.

He was, indeed, very liberal to the four toughs who were usually housed at McGinley's, though Deadwood Dave had at first expressed the opinion that he was a "stuck up kind of a cuss, and jest as like as not a fraud."

One evening, when he was there with the proprietor and the four comrades—other customers seldom sought that resort—he ventured to ask a small favor of them or one of them.

As he had "sugared them up" to their satisfaction, it was to be expected that they would gladly do something for him in return, and their willingness was only limited by their ability.

"Is thar any of you fellers," he inquired, "who is handy with the pen? I can write my name, and maybe can do a little more when I'm pushed; but I make such a poor fist of it that I would be ashamed to have anybody see my handwriting."

Aaron Isaacs could write, and admitted as much; but it was agreed that Sandy McGuckin was the champion penman of the party, and Sandy was glad to be of service to the gang's new friend, if he could get hold of proper tools for the purpose.

"What do you want done?" he asked, when the materials had been procured.

"I want," answered Pete, "to write a letter

to the superintendent of the Topnotch Mining Company."

Sandy started and hesitated.

He had been in that business once before, and his previous experience made him wonder what this man might intend to do.

"What do you want to say to him?" he asked.

"I want to apply for a posish."

"That's a scheme that ain't a bit likely to work," put in Deadwood Dave. "Those folks are a pious crowd, the piouses you ever struck, and I'm afeard that your style wouldn't suit 'em much better'n ourn, and I know that they wouldn't touch any of us with a ten-foot pole."

El Paso Pete ordered some more whisky for the party, as the easiest argument available.

"I understand that, Dave," said he, "and I shouldn't wonder if I know as much about the people as you do; but I've a notion that my style is just what they need and are bound to have. I want a posish as a sort of handy man—a bouncer, a chap who can make big-headed galoots stand around, who can keep order and do what I may call the rough work of managin'. That's the sort of man they need, and they've got to have him, if they haven't struck one already. Just you write that out, Sandy, and put it in as good shape as you can, and I'll pay you well for the job if it suits me."

Sandy addressed himself to the task, applied to it all the resources of his stimulated intellect, and produced an application that suited the applicant when it was read to him.

It was inclosed in an envelope directed to "Thomas R. Eagleson, Superintendent of the Topnotch Mining Company," and Sandy McGuckin was well paid for writing it, and more drinks were forthcoming at the expense of the visitor.

CHAPTER XVI.

YOUR NECKS INTO NOOSES.

DEADWOOD DAVE was considerably perplexed and worried by the application which El Paso Pete had concocted and Sandy McGuckin had put in shape for him.

He wanted to know whether this new and valuable friend, who could be of so much service to the gang, was going over to the enemy.

It was of course an understood thing that the new mining company was hostile to the old Topnotchers and the tough interests generally.

"You seem to be a squar' man," said he, "white all through, no sort of a tenderfoot, and not piouser than the law allows. I jest hope that you ain't goin' to sell out to that mining company."

"I am not the kind of man who sells out to anybody," replied the gentleman from El Paso. "I reckon, Dave, that you don't understand this little game of mine."

"Mebbe I don't; but I'm sart'in that thar can't be much hold out to the new minin' company. They're a mean and despicable set, too, with not a bit of public sperrit about them. The whole concern is on the make, and they don't mean to let anybody but themselves make anythin' if they can help it. If they keep on as they've been goin', the public sperrited citizens of this camp will rise up afore long and smash 'em."

"That is my opinion exactly," observed El Paso Pete, with a sudden burst of confidence, "and I reckon I may as well let you into a little secret, as we are all friends here, and may be partners."

As friendship and possible partnership with El Paso Pete was greatly to be desired by the gang, they listened eagerly to his explanation.

"As I told you," said he, "I am not the man to sell myself, and I sometimes think that I've got as much public spirit as anybody. Do you suppose for a minute that any measly, miserly wages that those folks could pay me would begin to buy such a man as I am? Chiefs ain't sold that cheap in my country. No, my friends and partners, that's not what I'm after. It's boodle!"

The eyes of his hearers glistened.

Boodle was what they were after, too; but they did not know how to get it, and hoped that their new friend was going to tell them.

"How are you goin' to make the scheme work?" inquired Deadwood Dave.

"That is what I am not ready to tell. I must wait and see how things shape themselves before I can say just what I am going to do. I wanted to let you into this thing a bit, so that you might make no mistake about my intentions. The first thing I want is to get a good grip on those chaps—a hard and cold grip—and then I will work them for all I am worth."

"That'll be mighty fine, if it works as well as it sounds."

"I mean to make it work. That's the only way to get along. It is strange to me that you fellers haven't tried to play some such game. I never had much to do with pious people, but have thought that they are easy to scare."

"Not allus, I reckon. We did try to run a skeer onto 'em a while ago; but it didn't seem to work. We mought have followed the thing up, if we hadn't had some other jobs on our hands."

"What other jobs?" inquired the visitor, half closing his eyes, lest their sparkle should sug-

gest the deep interest he was taking in this conversation.

"Well, as you are a friend of ours, and sorter hitched in the same harness, I may as well tell you, though I don't suppose it will interest you a bit."

The big ruffian gave a tolerably true account of the attempts of himself and his partners to get possession of Susan Marlow, to find her father's "diggin's," and finally to capture and corral Topnotch Tim.

"He did not, however, mention the name of Dan Lasher in the matter."

"Who put you up to those jobs?" the visitor wanted to know.

"Why, we put ourselves up to 'em. We had plenty o' grudges against the old cuss to work out. I don't mind sayin' that thar was somebody behind us with capital; but I can't be expected to give his name."

From the liberality with which El Paso Pete ordered more whisky for the party, it might be supposed that he had received some interesting information, and was possibly expecting to get hold of more.

"Since then," observed Dave by way of finish, "we hain't been doin' much of anythin'."

"It seems to me," suggested the liberal visitor, "if you won't take offense at me for speaking plainly—"

"Oh, no."

"Not at all."

"The plainer you speak, the better we like it."

The glib answers were so encouraging to the gentleman from El Paso, that his eyes flashed as he continued his suggestion.

"It seems to me, then, that you haven't got enough grit and get-up about you; that you give up too easily, and generally lack nerve and enterprise. I have heard something of those performances of yours, and have heard, too, that you have more than once been frightened out of your boots by the man you call Topnotch Tim. What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

Deadwood Dave leaned over and spoke in a confidential whisper, with the air of a man who is enunciating a great moral sentiment.

"I shouldn't wonder, now, if Topnotch whisky is kinder wearin' on a man."

"As a steady thing," remarked the visitor, "I doubt if it is calculated to give a man nerve and build up his brain. Suppose you quit it for a while, and try to brace up. There will be plenty of openings yet for public spirited citizens."

"When the openings come, we'll jump right into 'em," Ben Staples declared.

"Good-evening, then, and you had better brace up," was the parting word of El Paso Pete.

There was an almost murderous look on his face when he had got out into the street.

"You will jump your necks into nooses," he muttered. "That is the biggest and best jumping you are likely to do."

He went direct to the office of the mining company, as if he preferred to hand in personally the application which had been so carefully prepared by Sandy McGuckin.

Though the hour was late, he found the superintendent still at his desk, busy with the affairs of the new company, which he was working hard to place on a sound and substantial footing.

Mr. Eagleson was a man of about forty, but nearly bald, pale and rather thin, and with what might be styled an ascetic expression on his smoothly shaven face.

He looked up with a surprised air as El Paso Pete entered the room.

The visitor was picturesque, no doubt, but seemed to be out of place there.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he coldly inquired.

"It is a little matter of business," answered the other, as he helped himself to a seat.

"Be quick about it, then, if you please, as I am very busy."

"I supposed that you were expecting me."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Eagleson. "Expecting you? Why should I be expecting you?"

"Because you sent for me."

"Sent for you? I? Come, that is a little too much. Who are you, and what is your business here?"

"Is it possible, Mr. Eagleson, that a slight change in a man's get up can make such a big difference in his appearance? I perceive that I shall have to make you acquainted with myself."

El Paso Pete took off his sombrero, and then removed from his head a wig of long and curling black hair that had fallen down on his shoulders.

The difference was really astonishing.

His own hair, though black, was cut pretty close, and he would, without the wig and dressed in a business suit, have appeared to be a neat young fellow, good-looking and bright, but not varying much from the ordinary run of neat young men.

"Mr. Gannon!" exclaimed the Superintendent.

"Peter Gannon, at your service—the man you sent for, and who has been here several days."

"But why do you wear that wig and that outlandish costume?"

"Because both are necessary for business purposes. There are people in the world who know me, and I may not always wish to be known. Permit me to inform you, Mr. Eagleson, that here I am El Paso Pete, and that you are not, at least for the present, to know me by any other name."

"Well, I suppose you know what you are about; but you cannot expect me to address you as Mr. El Paso Pete."

"You need not address me at all, as I shall probably not see much of you in the presence of other people."

"What have you been doing, Mr. Gannon, since you got here?"

"Looking about, making acquaintances, and posting myself up generally. There is one little matter of business that I have attended to, according to your instructions."

"What is that?"

"I have discovered the author of the threatening and blackmailing letter that was sent to the company a while ago."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure, I will show you the proofs. Here is the anonymous letter, and here is a letter which a man wrote to-night at my request. Though a poor attempt was made to disguise the hand in your letter, the similarity of the two is so evident that no expert would be needed to decide that both were written by the same person."

"That is true, Mr. Gannon. Was the person one of those whose names I suggested to you?"

"Yes. They were all concerned in it, no doubt; but his guilt is plain, and you may take steps to punish him as soon as you please."

"I think I shall let him alone," said the superintendent after a brief consideration. "We have no fear of that gang, and his case can wait. As I hinted to you might happen, we have more important business to worry us now."

"The other matter that you spoke of? That is a serious business, and it may prove to be more serious than you expect."

"It may; but we are going through with it, just as I told you we might, and we will expect your help."

"You shall have it. Dear me, Mr. Eagleson, it is very late. You ought not to be working here at this hour, and I must hunt my roosting place. Good-night."

The next morning, as El Paso Pete was taking an early morning walk away from Topnotch, enjoying the balmy mountain air, he met a man who was coming down toward the town—a tall man, of peculiar appearance, who walked with long and rapid strides.

This man looked curiously at the picturesque person as he approached him, but would have gone on without stopping or speaking, if Gannon had not halted him, extending his hand.

"Good-morning, Mr. Marlow. I am glad to see you, and I wish I could hope that you were as glad to see me."

The Mad Parson looked at the man intently, and then a smile lighted up his face.

"Is it possible? Can this be Pete Gannon?"

"Just himself. You are much keener than Mr. Eagleson at the mine office, who failed to recognize me, though he knows me well."

"What are you doing here?"

"I have business here with the Topnotch Mining Company."

"But what is the meaning of that masquerade?"

"It is a bit of a disguise, and it seems to be a good one."

"I see. I remember that you had got the name of being one of the smartest detective officers in the employ of the Government. Have you quit that job?"

"Yes, I got tired of it, and preferred to work on my own account and be my own master. Do you live near here, Mr. Marlow?"

"A little way up the mountain."

"Higher up than this? I hope you enjoy it. Is Susan—is Miss Marlow—living there with you?"

"Yes, and enjoying herself, too."

"I should think it would be poor enjoyment, when her home is invaded by scoundrels who try to carry her off, and capture her father and put his life in peril. You perceive, Mr. Marlow, that I have not been idle since I came to Topnotch. I know who the wretches are who committed both these outrages."

"So do I. I have had no doubt about that."

"What are you going to do to punish them?"

"Nothing at all. They will be likely to work out their punishment in their own way. They have done me no harm, but have given me a warning that I have profited by. They are nothing but vermin, anyhow, and I have no fear of them."

"Very well, Mr. Marlow. I think they will work out their salvation with slipnooses. The villains!—to dare to try to touch *her*! Hanging is too good for them."

"Are you still fretting about the girl?"

"You know that I can never forget her. I wonder if she would be willing to see me?"

"I would be glad to ask you to my house, as I have always liked you; but I do not believe that she would ever care for you as you wish her to. Young women have their own notions, and my daughter is free to choose for herself."

"Is there anybody else that she cares for?"

"I do not know of anybody."

"While there is life there is hope. I may still have a chance, then. See you later, Mr. Marlow."

The two men separated, and El Paso Pete sighed as he went on his way.

CHAPTER XV.

A GREAT MORAL MOVE.

As Mr. Eagleson informed his secret agent, the Topnotch Mining Company had more important business on hand just then than attending to the punishment of a few rascals whose bark was believed to be much worse than their bite.

The affairs of the company were controlled by Jacob Marvel, the President—father of the Simon Marvel who has been introduced to the reader—and the superintendent, Thomas Eagleson.

Burch Blanton was nominally the manager of the mine; but he had no authority outside of the works, and was therefore merely a superior sort of foreman.

Above him was the superintendent, and above Eagleson was the president, who was residing in Topnotch and never absent from his business.

Beyond the president were the executive committee, who merely registered his will, having entire confidence in him, and allowing him to run things to suit himself.

Beyond the executive committee were the stockholders; but they held but one meeting, at which they delegated all authority to the executive committee, who had in their turn transferred it to the president and superintendent.

Thus those two controlled the company, and through the company were virtually the owners of Topnotch as it then existed.

Without doubt the projectors of the enterprise had been crafty and foresighted.

Before taking any steps toward re-opening the old mine, or even allowing it to be known that such a plan was being considered, they sent an agent up there, who purchased at very low rates the greater portion of the town site.

The calculation was, of course, that when the boom was started they would come into a considerable fortune by the sale of town lots, which would be a good speculation in itself, outside of the chances of the mine.

That was what happened, and they sold the lots with such restrictions and regulations as kept them under their control after they had passed out of their possession.

Jacob Marvel had emigrated to Kansas from an Eastern State, at the time of the anti-slavery excitement, among those who hoped to save, and succeeded in saving, that splendid territory from the encroachments of the slave-owners.

Being a shrewd trader—some called him unscrupulous—he had become wealthy.

Subsequently he had gone further westward, interesting himself largely in mining and landed property, and continually increasing his fortune.

From his New England birthplace he had brought some of the ideas and methods of the Puritans, and had fixed upon Topnotch as a good place to put them in practice.

Thus there was a little morality mixed with the main chance in his speculation in town lots, as they were sold with restrictions against gambling-houses, disreputable resorts, and even the customary saloons.

In these efforts the president was ably and eagerly aided by the superintendent, though Eagleson was a man who preferred to look at the practical side of such matters, rather than be bound by a theory.

Small towns or villages have been built and controlled upon such principles, with more or less success, in older communities, where law and order have become thoroughly respected; but it was not to be supposed that Jacob Marvel's system would suit Topnotch.

People generally object to being governed too much, and the dwellers in mining camps are notoriously impatient of restraint.

Thus it came to pass that Topnotch was by no means free from objectionable characters, who were merely confined, as far as their business was concerned, to those portions of the town site of which the mining company had never acquired control.

Those portions easily found an abundance of purchasers and renters at high prices, and enjoyed a "boom" that was ahead of anything else in the camp.

Jacob Marvel, who had determined to make a model town of Topnotch, was greatly worried by this state of affairs, but was not a bit discouraged.

He persisted in his purpose of getting rid of objectionable places and objectionable people.

Nothing of the kind had ever been tried—at least in nothing like so extensive and thorough a

style—in any other mining-camp; but none had ever offered such facilities as were enjoyed by the Topnotch Mining Company.

Holding the control of the town organization, which was a peculiar one, invented by Jacob Marvel, they could do in the name of law pretty much as they pleased, and they proceeded to do so.

An ordinance or decree was adopted, prohibiting gambling-houses, dance-halls, and other disreputable resorts, within the legal limits of Topnotch, and providing for their suppression as public nuisances.

It is one thing, however, to make laws, and quite another thing to enforce them.

When laws are found to be oppressive and contrary to the general sense of communities, insurrection is in order, and it may happen that attempts to enforce too exact order lead to the worst disorder.

When the Marvel decree was published by means of placards, the excitement in Topnotch was something that nobody could sneeze at.

At first the people at whom it was aimed laughed at it.

They had never heard of anything so uncalled for, so preposterous, so utterly out of place.

It was soon made evident to them, however, that Jacob Marvel and his followers were determined to enforce the law, and that they had made careful and extensive preparations for that purpose.

Fully believing that only a moral and model town could be truly prosperous, and that the interests of the miners, as well as the mining company, would be fostered by the measures he proposed, he felt that he would be justified in carrying out his intentions at any cost, even if it should be necessary to baptize the model town with blood.

Therefore he had spared no expense in procuring such a formidable force of auxiliaries—mercenaries, some other people styled them—as he supposed would be sufficient to squelch the very idea of opposition.

Part of them were enlisted in Topnotch, but many were procured from Tolbert.

The town in the valley had suffered by the rise of its neighbor up the mountain, was envious of its prosperity, and was willing that it should enjoy as big a row as it was capable of.

Therefore plenty of men could be found down yonder who were willing to take part in that row, especially if they were paid for it.

Ben Eagleson, a younger brother of the superintendent, was made marshal of Topnotch and commander of the forces.

He was a tall and stalwart man, active and energetic, accustomed to the men and manners of mining-camps, skilled in the use of weapons, and reputed to be quite fearless.

Peter Gannon had been imported to aid this great moral move; but it was believed that his services would be more effective if he should work secretly, without being known as one of Jacob Marvel's partisans.

In plain words, he was to be employed as a spy.

Burch Blanton was told that he would be expected to take part in the operations of the army of reform; but he informed his superiors that he had been engaged as a mining engineer, and was not inclined to undertake any new duties.

Such independence was displeasing to them; but he was needed where he was, and it was thought best to overlook his insubordination for the present.

It may seem strange that such extensive and formidable preparations, whose effects promised to be more or less sanguine, should be made for the furtherance of a purely moral purpose; but it often happens that great reformers will stop at nothing in their efforts to force their ideas upon other people.

CHAPTER XVI.

"SATAN APPEARED ALSO."

If the magnates of the Topnotch Mining Company supposed that the gamblers and others would be frightened by the preparations that were being made for their subjugation, and would incontinently pick up their gripsacks and skedaddle, they were greatly mistaken in the men with whom they had to deal.

Those men, in the terse and expressive language of the day, didn't scare worth a cent.

On the contrary, when they discovered—and the discovery was quickly made—that a crusade against them was being organized, they lost no time in making their own preparations for resistance.

Already they had opprobrious epithets for the leaders of their adversaries, whom they stigmatized as the Nabobs and the Tycoons, names that were by no means calculated to secure popularity in Topnotch.

They had their spies in the enemy's camp, who gave them speedy and reliable information of every move that was meditated there.

Of that information they availed themselves promptly, for the purpose of defeating the plans that were laid against them.

Being fully determined not to yield an inch of ground without fighting for it, they believed that they must win in what they styled the struggle of the people against monopoly.

They first gave their attention to the saloon-keepers, urging them to make common cause with those who were immediately threatened.

"You are in the same boat that we are in," they argued, "and must sink or swim with us."

"The Tycoons hate you as badly as they hate us, and you ought to have sense enough to know that they mean to get rid of you as soon as they can."

"They have left you out of their despotic decree, merely because they did not want to have too heavy a contract on their hands at the start, but preferred to separate us and pitch into us by piecemeal."

"If they can get us out of the way, you may be sure that your turn will come next, and then they will make short work of you."

"Then you will be whirled out of this camp so quick that it will make your heads swim."

"Your only chance to hold your property and business, if not to keep your lives and liberties, is to join us and give the Tycoons a lesson which will never need to be repeated."

These arguments had their full weight with the saloonists, the more so because they were not subjected to any persuasion from the other party.

Being unable to promise them protection, Jacob Marvel and his followers could only leave them to draw a favorable conclusion from the fact that they were not named in the decree which was issued against the others.

They gave that circumstance no more consideration than it deserved, and promised their natural allies that they would join them in the event of a fight, and in the mean time would maintain what might be termed an armed neutrality.

Thus there was a numerous and tolerably compact organizations arrayed against the Tycoons, and one strong point in connection with them was the fact that most of them "would rather fight than eat."

As for drinking, that was another matter, but they considered themselves fully as able to fight as to drink.

Dan Lasher was the natural leader of the anti-Tycoon party, and all the elements of the opposition gravitated to him and rested upon him.

That was the sort of thing that he rejoiced in, and no person was more ready than he to welcome a collision with the Tycoons.

His place was the headquarters of the rebellion, and was the grand rallying-point in the event of a fight.

The other threatened persons were prepared to close their concerns at an instant's notice, so that they might hasten to the defense of whatever point should be first attacked.

Not a bit of timidity or hesitation could be charged against the Tycoons.

Having determined what they meant to do, they went at it in a straightforward manner, with no parleying or dilly-dallying, intending to strike at once at the stronghold of the enemy, and hoping to crush all opposition by a sharp and vigorous campaign.

Marshal Ben Eagleson, in accordance with the terms of the ordinance, summoned a posse to suppress the establishments declared to be nuisances.

This amounted merely to calling his troops together and telling them what he expected to do.

Dan Lasher's place was the point of attack. If the insurrection could be subdued there—if opposition could be crushed out in that quarter—the rest of the work was expected to be a mere matter of detail, picking off the enemy by detachments.

Handsome Dan had early information of the intended movement, and one of the first to bring it to him was El Paso Pete.

There was no reason why Mr. Peter Gannon, though an agent of the Tycoons, should not do this as no special secret was made of their intentions, nor was any pains taken to conceal their purpose from the public.

In so doing he could not harm his employers, but might, in his capacity of spy, make something of a point for himself.

His news, however, had preceded him, as he was only one of the first to bring it, and instant action had been taken on it.

The other threatened men, all natural and inevitable allies, were coming into Lasher's place when he got there, for consultation and mutual aid, and they kept coming until a formidable force was gathered there.

As yet the saloonists kept out; but they were all on the alert, having a plan of their own for taking part in the difficulty if it should become necessary for them to show their hand.

Handsome Dan's establishment was not admirably adapted for defensive purposes, and had been chosen as the rendezvous for two reasons.

In the first place, it was his, and in the second place, it had been selected by the Tycoons as the point at which they were to strike.

It was a two-story house, of course a frame house, and the first floor was occupied as a saloon which had lately passed into the possession of Dan Lasher.

His gambling-rooms were up-stairs, and form-

ed the stronghold of the garrison, the lower floor being not so easy of defense, though it was necessary to the existence of the rest of the establishment.

The saloon floor must be defended, however, and it was closed and fortified as speedily as possible after the news of the attack was received.

This house had the advantage of being joined on the right by a building quite as high as itself.

On the left was a smaller house, a one-story affair; but that was also serviceable, if the enemy could be kept from taking possession of its roof.

Thus the front of the saloon was the weakest point, and that was partly left open to admit the friends of the proprietor, who were dropping in to take part in the struggle.

The middle of the afternoon had been the time set for the forward movement of the Tycoons; but Marshal Eagleson had not got his forces ready at the appointed hour, and the affair dragged.

Below stairs in the building that was to be beleaguered, were armed men completing the preparations for defense, and encouraging each other to a resolute resistance.

Up-stairs were Dan Lasher and a number of his friends and followers, who were similarly employed.

Among them was El Paso Pete, and who was so numerous as that picturesque person?

Next to Dan Lasher, an outsider might have considered him the most important man in the party—one who was respected and trusted by all the others, and whose advice and assistance were in great demand.

He was, indeed, considerably more numerous than Handsome Dan, speaking fifty words where Dan spoke one.

He was holding forth to a group that surrounded him, unfolding a famous plan which he had invented for defeating the Tycoons and bringing them to grief.

This plan was that a select party of the insurrectionists should stealthily leave the building, and conceal themselves until the attack was about to be made.

Then they should hasten to the mine, capture it by surprise, and hold it against all comers, thus carrying the war into Africa, and striking their adversaries at the most vulnerable point.

Not a bad plan, perhaps, if it had not involved a division of the force that might prove fatal.

While he was explaining this plausible scheme, Dan Lasher was gazing intently at him from a little distance, and listening to the whispered words of Deadwood Dave.

It might have been better for Pete if he had used his tongue less and his ears more.

"Are you sure that you saw him go into Eagleson's office?" whispered the gambler.

"Sart'in," answered Dave. "He went thar straight from Bart McGinley's the night I spoke of, and I've seen him come out of thar sence."

"I wish you had told me of that sooner; but it is not too late to settle his case. I have been noticing him lately and have considered his ways rather queer. It seems to me, too, that there is something about his looks that is not new to me. I am really inclined to believe that the fellow is a fraud and a spy."

"How're you goin' to find it out?"

"Let me alone for that. When I begin to suspect a man, I am sure to find proof pretty quick."

"What will you do to him when it is proved?"

"I shall make an example of him."

Handsome Dan stepped to the group that surrounded El Paso Pete, and listened to his chin music for a few moments.

"That is a fine plan of yours," he said as he pressed forward and faced the speaker. "It is a very good scheme, if it will work; but it will need a brave and smart man for a leader. Will you take the lead?"

Pete hesitated for an instant, while his questioner looked at him keenly, and the hesitation did him no good.

"Of course I will," he answered suddenly. "Glad of the chance. I know just what to do, too, and nobody could work the scheme better than I can."

"I have no doubt of that, and we will work you for all you are worth. Let me take a look at that hat of yours, Pete. I would like to know what it is made of."

That was a queer request, especially in consideration of the place and time and other circumstances; but there was no reason why El Paso Pete should not comply with it, and a refusal would be yet more singular than the request.

He lifted his sombrero from his head somewhat carefully, lest he might possibly disarrange his wig, and banded it to the gambler.

Dan Lasher scarcely glanced at it as he held it in his left hand.

With his right he reached out suddenly, grabbed El Paso Pete's wig of long and dark hair, and snatched it from his head.

The spy with his short hair stood revealed, his appearance greatly changed by that simple act.

"Pete Gannon!" exclaimed the gambler, struck by the sudden revelation.

The spy did not need a word to tell him what was the matter.

He knew what he had to expect, unless he could save himself, and had already made a dash for liberty.

Two windows on the side adjoining the low house were open to their fullest extent, partly for air, and partly for purposes of observation.

El Paso Pete jumped recklessly through one of the openings, followed by a bullet from Dan Lasher's ready revolver, which just grazed him.

He alighted on the adjoining roof, and the next instant leaped to the ground.

Anybody who supposed that he had injured himself by this move was mistaken, as he was on his feet immediately, apparently sound in wind and limb.

As he emerged from the shelter of the building, and ran out into the street, he was followed by a fusillade from the upper windows of the house he had just left; but not a bullet touched him.

The next moment he ran into the arms of his friends, who were advancing to the attack from the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOT AND HEAVY.

WHEN Marshal Ben Eagleson had got his force into working order, he speedily made it plain, alike to friends and foes, that he meant business.

It was a truly formidable array that advanced against Dan Lasher's establishment, and El Paso Pete, when he perceived their numbers, and noted the excellent quality of their weapons, their compact organization, and their resolute air, easily predicted for them a complete victory.

Naturally he was rejoiced at the prospect of getting even with the man who had exposed him and come so near putting an end to his existence.

It may be said for the Tycoons that they had the courage of their convictions, showing that they would not be content with any compromises or half-way measures.

The contract which they had undertaken was a serious and expensive one; but they were at least sincere, believing that their success would in the end greatly benefit the good people of Topnotch, as well as themselves.

As the news of the intended attack had spread until everybody was aware of what was going on, there was of course great excitement in the camp.

It was, however, at the beginning of the affair, what may be styled suppressed excitement.

The citizens generally stood around, eagerly watching the preliminaries of the contest, but without manifesting any special desire to take sides, as the struggle promised to be a serious and sanguinary one.

Most of the stores were closed or closing, but the saloons were wide open and doing a rushing business, with the exception of those which had gambling or dance-hall attachments, and were consequently covered by the edict of the Tycoons.

The saloonists, however, were to shut up shop instantly and hasten to the assistance of their natural allies, and in such a move they counted on the aid of many of their regular customers.

Marshal Eagleson deployed his force on the street near Dan Lasher's establishment, stretching them out so as to give them as formidable an appearance as possible, with the view of overawing the opposition.

Then he advanced toward the building, and summoned its inmates to surrender in the name of the law.

Dan Lasher, who was of course the spokesman of the other side, wanted to know what he meant by that kind of foolishness.

The marshal produced his authority, read the ordinance, or whatever it might be called, and declared that he was there for the purpose of enforcing that law by suppressing all the gambling-houses and other disreputable resorts.

He said that he had a sufficient force for the purpose, that he meant to do what the law directed him to do, and that all obnoxious parties would consult their safety as well as their interest by peaceable submission.

Dan Lasher, from the upper floor of the stronghold of the opposition, answered him plainly and to the point.

"You and your crowd," replied the gambler, "had better go home and mind your own business. You are liable to get hurt if you fool around here. What you call a law is not worth the paper it is written on, and your authority don't amount to a row of pins. If you suppose that the Topnotch Mining Company, or any two or three Tycoons, can't run this camp, you are as much mistaken as if you had butted a hornets' nest. We know our rights, and we mean to stay just here. So you had better call off your crowd, and go and take a nap."

The marshal again asserted his authority, and again summoned the fortress to surrender, declaring that resistance to his summary proceedings might lead to bloodshed.

"Go on with the funeral!" was Handsome Dan's ultimatum. "If any gets hurt in this difficulty, it will be your fault, and the Topnotch Mining Company will have to suffer the consequences and settle the damages."

Thus the issue was clearly presented, and the representative of the Tycoons prepared for action.

Putting most of his men under such cover as was convenient and within easy range, he led forward half a dozen men whom he had previously selected for desperate work.

They were, indeed, a forlorn hope, and the intention was to force an entrance at the front of the saloon under Lasher's gambling-rooms.

The instrument with which this object was to be effected was a beam which had been prepared for use as a battering ram, and the half a dozen men were to rush forward with it and burst open the door.

This enterprise was not as desperate as it appeared to be, owing to the use that was made of the rest of the force.

The men under cover in and about the street, who had been chosen for their ability as marksmen, were to aid the onset of the storming party by keeping up a constant fire on the front windows of the building, with the view of preventing those inside from showing as much as a rifle-barrel.

At the same time another detachment, which had procured ladders, was to mount to the roof of the one-story house, and thus make a flank attack upon the Lasher establishment.

These were good plans, and they promised to be successful, though some very hard fighting might be expected.

First in order was the battering-ram experiment.

Ben Eagleson, who was loaded with courage, was not going to order any men to go where he was not willing to lead them; therefore, he headed the stormers, who trotted briskly across the street with the beam.

It was to be supposed that the sooner they could reach the building and begin their work, the safer they would be.

Their advance was most efficiently covered by the riflemen, who executed the task assigned to them in a manner that was masterly and complete.

The fire which they directed against the front windows of the Lasher establishment was so rapid and continuous that the rebels were unable to reply to it, from sheer inability to get at the openings.

They had the satisfaction of knowing that their opponents had begun the bloody work, but at the same time found themselves at a disadvantage because they had not themselves begun it.

All went well for the cause of the Tycoons at the start.

The storming party reached the building without a scratch, and instantly set the battering-ram at work.

Again and again it struck the wood, and at the third blow the door was driven from its fastenings and fell inward.

The auxiliary storming party had hastened to plant its ladders and reach the roof of the smaller building, but soon had cause to regret the rash endeavor.

Dan Lasher and his friends, unable just then to be of any use at the front of the house, could turn their attention to the side windows, and there they put in some very effective work.

As fast as the stormers in that quarter showed themselves above the edge of the roof, they were picked off and tumbled over in a style that delighted the souls of their adversaries.

For their part, they were so completely discouraged by this reception, that the flanking movement was immediately abandoned.

First blood, therefore, was counted for the insurrectionists, and they were of the opinion that the first real success was theirs also.

It remained to be seen how the advantage which the other side had gained in front would pan out.

As soon as the door was down, Marshal Eagleson and his half dozen followers made a rush to enter, and their friends across the street made a rush to help them.

They might better have been less eager and hasty, as the entrance to that fortress was by no means as easy as they had imagined it might be.

Just behind that burst door was a fortification which they could not pass, and behind the fortification were plenty of resolute men, well armed and sheltered, and determined even to vindictiveness in their defense of what they believed to be their rights.

This battle was their Bunker Hill, and they meant to fight it for all they were worth.

The fortification had been made of the best materials available, and was something more than a line extending crosswise of the saloon, as the ends bent until they touched the front of the room at each side of the door, where the windows were practicably impassable.

Thus the defenders were able not only to com-

pletely command the one opening, but to cross-fire from each side, so that it would be nearly as difficult to sneak up as to approach the passage squarely.

It was well for them that they had confined their efforts to this ambush, as it may be called, instead of wasting themselves on a costly defense of the door.

This was clearly the opinion of Dan Lasher and his followers, who, relieved from the duty of guarding against a flank attack, hastened to turn their attention to the foes at the front of the house.

The latter got at the first rush such a strong taste of the quality of the fortification and the men behind it, that they were in no hurry to take another bite.

Indeed, the affair began to look as if they had bit off more than they could chew.

Not only were they cut down by the fire in front of them, but their foes on the upper floor, finding themselves able to get at the openings there, began to send a shower of revolver-bullets down among the daring fellows who were clustered about the door.

This was too much for flesh and blood to stand, and Ben Eagleson gave the order to retreat, which was gladly obeyed by those of his followers who could get away.

They resumed the positions which they had occupied before the attack was made, and opened a desultory fire upon the building, to which its defenders leisurely replied when they could do so without exposing themselves.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"ON, TO THE MINE!"

It was "war to the knife, and knife to the hilt," in Topnotch.

The camp had in former times gone through some severe experiences in the line of street fights, rampant rowdiness, and conflicts between law and lawlessness; but had never known anything like this.

Blood had already flowed freely, and the struggle promised to continue until one side or the other should surrender or be crushed.

Neither side was likely to surrender, as the Tycoons were more than ever determined to push their purpose, and their opponents had become excited by the conflict until it was difficult to restrain them within the limits of prudence.

Business was of course suspended, and all who were not engaged in the struggle, were either watching it or carefully keeping out of its way.

Some were considering the advisability of taking sides, and each of the contending factions was eager for recruits.

Thus far the advantage was decidedly with the insurrectionists; but that was only because of their fortified position and the ambushade they had prepared for their assailants.

They could not venture out from the building that sheltered them, as Marshal Eagleson's forces were still the more numerous outside, as well as the better organized and armed.

It naturally occurred to the Tycoons that, as they had their adversaries shut up, they might keep them shut up, and starve them into a surrender.

As they were supposed to have no provisions inside, unless the liquors in the saloon might be considered as provisions, it was reasonable to suppose that before long they would be obliged to come out and give up.

It would only be necessary to establish and maintain an efficient blockade.

Therefore Ben Eagleson, acting under the instructions of the Tycoons, disposed his forces so as to guard all possible exits from the Lasher building.

At the same time he strove to secure recruits in and about Topnotch, and sent to Tolbert for more mercenaries.

Handsome Dan, however, had matured and already put in operation a plan which threatened to shatter the machinations of his enemies.

As soon as they retreated from his front after their disastrous attack, he sent out a couple of emissaries, well-known men with persuasive tongues, who were to stir up the saloonists and incite them to immediate action.

"Now is your chance," was substantially the argument of the emissaries.

"If you want to save your rights and keep your property, now is the time to strike a blow that will count."

"If you don't want to be crushed out of existence and driven away from Topnotch, with your business destroyed and your hard earnings exhausted, help us now, and help yourselves, before it is everlastingly too late."

"We knocked the Tycoons cold in the first round, and have got them on the run, and now is the time to follow them up and make an end of them."

"All you have to do is to shut up your places, sally out, and spank them smartly in the rear, while we smash their faces in the front."

"Then we will run them clear out of the camp, and they will have to submit to our terms before they will be allowed to come back."

"Do this, and do it right now, and victory

is ours, and we can run the camp to suit ourselves."

This appeal was instantly effective with the saloonists, who had only been awaiting a propitious moment for pitching in.

Under the instructions of Dan Lasher's emissaries they closed their saloons, sallied forth singly or in pairs, came together secretly at a spot agreed upon, and advanced against the rear of the enemy.

Marshal Eagleson had not been successful in gathering recruits in Topnotch, where the sentiment of the people was mainly opposed to the measures of the Tycoons, and the recent success of the opposition was calculated to discourage enlistments.

Hours would be needed to get more mercenaries from Tolbert up into the mountains, and in the mean time, the auxiliaries of the Lasher faction were right at hand and ready for business.

Night came upon the combatants, and found them still engaged in desultory fighting; but it was such a night as Topnotch had never before known.

There being no street lamps, the town was usually lighted by the gayly illuminated saloons and other establishments which the Tycoons were endeavoring to do away with; but there was no such cheerful radiance on this occasion.

All those places were tightly closed, and darkness prevailed.

The darkness was very dark, too, suggesting the evil period that had come to Topnotch, bringing sorrow and gloom.

Nothing could suit the insurrectionists better than this, as their friends on the outside could organize and advance without being perceived, while they knew just where to find and strike their foes.

Dan Lasher, watching eagerly for the onset of the saloonists, had his followers ready to rush out and take advantage of the confusion as soon as the attack should be made.

At last he heard the welcome sound of firing from the right direction, accompanied by yells that were intended to strike terror to the souls of the Tycoons.

The expected confusion occurred just as Dan Lasher wished it to.

Ben Eagleson's forces, scattered here and there about the Lasher building, intent only upon getting shots at its inmates or preventing them from escaping, were more than surprised by this attack from an unexpected quarter.

They were, indeed, if not thrown into a panic, so upset and demoralized that they were beyond control, and could not be rallied for any prompt and concerted action.

Just at the right moment Dan Lasher and his comrades sallied forth to complete the rout of the enemy.

The trouble then was, not to secure the defeat of their foes, but to avoid the error of firing into their friends in the darkness.

In this their difficulty might have been greater than it was had not their foes taken to flight.

The myrmidons of the Tycoons, separated, split into squads, and everywhere confronted by enemies, were justified in supposing that all Topnotch had risen against them, and that there was then nothing for them to do but to get out of the way as speedily as possible.

So they did get out of the way, and their retreat speedily became a stampede, which was not likely to be stayed by any efforts of their own or their leaders, as the nature of the double attack compelled them to scatter in various directions.

The men who had been shut up in the Lasher building met their friends the saloonists, and congratulated each other upon their glorious victory.

No time was wasted, however, in congratulations or any other talk, as business was pressing.

Handsome Dan, not being one of those who believe in a golden bridge for a flying enemy, was eager to hurry the flight of his foes and push them to the utmost extremity.

He wanted to seal the defeat of the Tycoons by driving them and their allies so far out of Topnotch that they would find it no easy matter to get back.

It had already been settled that, if they should be allowed to come back at all, it would only be upon terms to be dictated by the victors, and it was to be expected that the terms would be pretty severe.

He soon discovered, however, that he was not the monarch of all he surveyed in Topnotch, as some of his followers had views that conflicted seriously with his own.

The pursuit of the retreating myrmidons did not result very successfully, as most of them escaped under cover of the darkness, and found various places of concealment.

Dan Lasher was especially eager in the search for Jacob Marvel and the Eaglesons, believing that if he could get them into his power he could easily settle the difficulty to suit himself; but the greater part of his friends were soon headed in another direction.

"On, to the mine!" way the cry that was raised.

By this time the original fighters, including the saloon keepers and their dependents, had been reinforced by a numerous crowd of roughs and rounders, who were not only quick to join the winning side, but believed that they saw in the general disturbance opportunities for helping themselves to other people's property which ought not to be neglected.

Inflamed by victory, as well as by fighting whisky, the mass of the insurrectionists had got it into their heads that it would be an easy thing to capture the works of the Topnotch Mining Company, and take possession of the mine.

By so doing they believed that they would place themselves in the best possible position for dictating terms to the Tycoons.

They did not perceive, as Dan Lasher did, that in this they would be abandoning the attitude of defending themselves and their rights, and pressing forward to do a clearly unlawful act.

"On, to the mine!" was the cry, and there was no restraining them.

CHAPTER XIX.

DEADWOOD DAVE'S STRATEGY.

AMONG those who might be counted in the mob of insurrectionists, and whose ideas differed somewhat from those of the supposed leader of the faction, were Deadwood Dave and his gang.

They had noted with intense satisfaction the progress of the storm that was brewing, believing that they would sooner or later find profit in it for themselves.

The big fellow plumed himself upon the fact that through him the true character of El Paso Pete had been discovered.

He had followed the picturesque stranger after the interview at Bart McGinley's, not because he suspected him of being anything but what he claimed to be, but because he wanted to know more about him, hoping to be able to use the knowledge for his own purposes.

When Pete Gannon entered the office of the Topnotch Mining Company, and remained there quite a length of time, and the watcher afterward discovered that he had been closeted there with Superintendent Eagleson, Deadwood Dave's suspicions were aroused.

Taken in connection with the revelations that had been made to El Paso Pete at McGinley's, the visit really did have a suspicious look.

Yet it might have been made merely for the purpose of applying for the "posish" of which the stranger had spoken.

As Pete did not again put in an appearance at McGinley's, though expected to do so, the big fellow continued to watch him, and the more he watched, the stronger his suspicions grew.

He made no mention of them to Dan Lasher, however, until the crisis of the storm arrived, and then his whispered statements resulted in the sudden exposure of the spy.

Deadwood Dave had no doubt that by this performance he had "made himself solid" with Handsome Dan, and would thenceforward occupy a foremost position among his supporters and friends.

Yet the big bully did not hanker after a position in the front rank of the fighters, nor did he seek to occupy such a position.

He and his comrades had theretofore accomplished their iniquities with as little personal risk as possible, and they hoped to continue to get their chestnuts out of the fire without burning their fingers.

Before Dave went to join Dan Lasher at his castle, he enjoined it upon his comrades that they must remain at McGinley's and keep quiet, but must be ready for immediate action when he should give the word.

"Thar's goin' to be wild doin's," he assured them. "Topnotch is likely to be all tore up, and thar's no tellin' who will be on top when the scrimmage is over. But it's sartin that we'll have a gay old chance to skip about and pick up things, if we keep our heads level, and never look out for nothin' but Number One."

His advice was so sound that the rest of the gang followed it implicitly.

After he had carefully kept himself out of the way of bullets in Lasher's up-stairs rooms, it was not to be supposed that he would frantically rush out with the rest to seek a fight with the myrmidons of the Tycoons, and he did no such rash act.

As soon as there was no danger to confront, and it was evident that the Tycoons were on the run, he sneaked out and hurried to McGinley's.

There he found his comrades awaiting him anxiously and somewhat impatiently.

"What's been keeping you, Dave?" angrily demanded Sandy McGinley. "There's the biggest kind of a row going on, and we could never hope for a better chance to do a little business."

"Don't I know more about that than you do?" loftily replied the big fellow. "Hain't I been out thar among 'em, whar the fire was flashin', and the smoke was rollin', and the bullets was flyin', reskin' my life for you fellows? Have you

got it into your fool heads that Deadwood Dave don't know what he's about?"

"That's all right; but we ought to be doing something. It seems to me that we are wasting a lot of time. Why didn't you get here sooner?"

"Because the thing wasn't ripe. Because the time hadn't come. It has come now. The Tycoons are whipped, and t'other fellers are chasin' 'em hot foot, all as crazy as loons. Now is our time to make the best strike we ever made."

"What sort of a strike?" inquired Bad Lands Ben.

"While those cusses are drivin' the Tycoons out o' the camp, and foolin' away thar time with fightin', we will pitch right out for the minin' company's office, and gobble up the cash thar."

"Supposin' it's guarded?"

"It won't be. The Tycoons allowed that they had a sure thing, and they didn't have no notion o' gittin' whipped. So they never thought o' guardin' or hidin' anythin'. No, boys, thar won't be nobody thar. If any men had been left thar, they'd soon be scared off."

"I hope you're right about that, Dave. You ought to know more about it than we do."

"Come on, then! As public sperrited citizens, it stands us in hand to make hay while the sun shines."

As it happened, there was somebody in the office of the Topnotch Mining Company, though not a somebody who was calculated to interfere with the plan of Deadwood Dave and his friends.

Jacob Marvel, who had been informed of the unpleasant adventure that was his son's first experience in Topnotch, and who had little confidence in Simon's discretion and ability to take care of himself, had exacted from the young man a solemn promise that he would not stir from the office until the expected conflict was ended.

Therefore Simon, who was a man of his word, stayed right there, though he was anxious to get out and see what was going on, and he had a tedious and lonesome time.

He heard firing plainly enough, and plenty of it; then it partly died away for a while, and then it started in fiercely once more.

Simon's eager curiosity prompted him to wander forth and see how the struggle was likely to terminate; but his promise kept him in.

Though he could not doubt that the Tycoons would succeed in their endeavor, as he had been assured that the preparations were perfect and the force was amply sufficient for the work, he could not help feeling uneasy, in view of the continued fighting that seemed to be going on.

It was certain that his friends were not having as easy a task as they had expected to find.

As nobody came near him, and the vicinity of the office was silent and deserted, he was unable to satisfy his curiosity, and could only fret and worry in his voluntary prison-house.

Again, as his hearing served him, the excitement died away, and it was to be supposed that one side or the other had gained the victory; but he could only guess at the result of the conflict.

He wished that somebody would come along to tell him some news and break the monotony of his confinement.

When at last somebody did come, there was plenty of news, with no monotony, and his time arrived to take part in the excitement.

Deadwood Dave and his gang made their way to the mining company's office quietly and sneakingly, careful not to attract attention to their movements, and keeping out of the way of all crowds and groups.

When they reached their destination, they perceived that there was a light in the office, and it behooved them, in consideration of their precious scalps, to learn whether there were any men inside.

Deadwood Dave sneaked up to a window, and looked in.

When he returned to his friends, his ugly face was lighted up by an expression of joyful malice.

"What is it, Dave?" inquired Ben Staples.

"Anybody thar?"

"Yes, one feller, and that is right into our hands."

"Who is he?"

"The tenderfoot that we caught awhile ago, and had to turn him loose—old man Marvel's son. We'll git him, if we don't git anythin' else, and he will be wuth a pile to us."

Deadwood Dave led the way to the office door, followed by his partners, in the sneaking way that indicated their proclivity for thieving.

Trying the door, and finding it unlocked, he gave the signal, and the gang rushed in.

Simon Marvel was seized and overpowered before he knew what was the matter.

He instantly recognized his captors, and was fully aware of the fact that he had fallen into bad hands.

"What do you mean by this outrage?" he angrily demanded. "What are you here for?"

"Jest attendin' to business," answered the big bully. "We've got you now, sweetness, and we mean to git out of you all the valley thar is into you."

"You had better get away, if you want to save your skins. My father and his friends will

be here soon, and they will string you scoundrels right up by the necks."

"Not much, sonny. It ain't them that's doin' the hangin' jest now. The Tycoons and all that tribe have been whipped out o' thar boots, and scattered over creation and part o' Topnotch. It's likely that your dad and them Eaglesons have been hung afore now."

"Hung! My father hung!"

"Well, we didn't go to the hangin'; but Dan Lasher and his pard was arter the Tycoons with blood in their eyes, and what can you expect? I tell you, bub, it don't do to fool with the Topnotchers. Them as tries to squelch 'em is liable to git squelched."

"I cannot believe it."

"Don't believe nothin', if that's any comfort to you; but you know what becomes of onbelievers. Come, boys, we can't waste time on this youngster. Gobble up the vallybles, and we'll pull out."

This order was easier to give than to execute.

The money and other valuables which the company kept there had been hived away and locked up in a safe, fire-proof and burglar-proof, so strong and heavy that it had cost quite a pile of money to get it up to Topnotch.

Deadwood Dave and his partners eyed the safe mournfully, recognizing the fact that it was beyond their burglarious ability.

They ordered Simon Marvel to give them the key; but he had neither key nor combination, and a thorough search failed to discover anything with which it could be opened.

After ransacking the desks and finding nothing of value to reward their labor, they wreaked their spite on the office by smashing the furniture and destroying the papers they came across.

Then they led forth Simon Marvel and piloted him toward Bart McGinley's.

"I wonder, Dave, what has become of Topnotch Tim," remarked Aaron Isaacs as they sneaked homeward. "Did you see him anywhere to-day?"

"No, and I don't want to. I hope he won't turn up in Topnotch very soon."

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE MINE.

It was true that Timothy Marlow had not been in Topnotch that day, and he had not intended to visit the scene of the struggle.

From his conduct at the opening of Dan Lasher's gambling rooms it might be supposed that he would favor the purposes of the Tycoons; but the Mad Parson was known to be an eccentric character, whose opinions and actions were presumed to depend considerably upon the humor of the moment.

Yet he was in reality not a bit whimsical, and might generally have given sound and substantial reasons for all he did or left undone.

Those who were best acquainted with him knew that he did not believe in stuffing religion down the throats of people, or in enforcing morality by means of a club.

Instead of visiting Topnotch, he went to the mine, where he sought and easily found Burch Blanton.

It was a singular but not unlikely friendship that had sprung up between the old man and the young one, and it was founded upon the knowledge which each had gained of the other's good points, producing that mutual strong esteem which is the basis of the best friendship.

On Blanton's part, his respect for Timothy Marlow was doubtless enhanced by his affection for the old man's daughter, which he knew, by this time, was fully reciprocated, and which had therefore become a clear case of happiness for two.

He would, however, have seen but little of Susan Marlow, and would have had scant opportunities for pressing his suit, had it not been for the favor with which her father regarded him.

"I am glad to find you here," said the Mad Parson, as he met his young friend.

"I can generally be found here," answered Blanton. "I seldom go anywhere, except to your house."

"I thought it quite possible that you might be in Topnotch to-day. Of course you know what is going on there."

"Yes, indeed. Mr. Eagleson invited me to go to town and take part in that performance, and the invitation amounted almost to an order."

"Did you refuse?"

"I respectfully declined, telling him that I was not hired for that sort of thing, and that my work at the mine was as much as I cared to attend to."

"No doubt you were right about that; but it may make trouble. Jacob Marvel and the men who are with him are determined to make a success of what you call the performance, and you may be discharged for your refusal to help them."

"Perhaps I could stand that. I am a pretty independent person, myself."

"Perhaps in the long run it might do you more good than harm. Tell me, Blanton, what

do you think of the move the Tycoons are making?"

"Do you call them the Tycoons, too, Mr. Marlow?"

"I have heard the name so often lately, that it sticks to me."

"Well, sir, it is my private opinion, though I would not want to publish it, that the performance is all wrong. No doubt the gambling-houses and other places are wicked and immoral, and you and I, who don't go in for that sort of thing, might consider them public nuisances; but there are many people to be thought of besides you and me and the Topnotch Mining Company. The men who congregate in and about a mining-camp, and those among them who are the hardest workers, too, regard those places as public necessities. They are bound to have their recreation in whatever shape they choose to take it, and may be expected to resist all attempts to deprive them of it. There is as much feeling of personal liberty here to the square inch as anywhere in the country, and it is not safe to jump on it too heavy."

"I am a strong believer in personal liberty, too. How do the miners feel about it?"

"As they are the hardest workers we have, and the fondest of the recreations that Topnotch supplies, they are opposed to the performance all through, though they are not likely to mix in the disturbance. They would fight for the mine, of course, but would never stir a foot to help the Topnotch Mining Company in this crusade."

"They would fight for the mine, would they? It might be well to be sure of that, Blanton. They may have a chance to fight for the mine."

"Do you think so?"

"Don't you think so? How do you suppose the trouble in Topnotch is going to end?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Eagleson was so confident of success, having made such complete preparations, and having, as he told me, plenty of fighting men, that it looks as if the Tycoons ought to win; but I have my doubts about that."

"You may well have. If the other side once get a bit of an advantage, a crowd will hasten to join them, and then it is good-by to the Tycoons. Topnotch will go crazy when that happens, and the wildest guess at what the people may do will be the nearest one. I should say that they might naturally be expected to strike at the mine, not only to take revenge on the Tycoons, but for what they could get out of it."

"I have thought of that, Mr. Marlow, and have quietly made some preparations, so as to be ready in case of trouble."

"What have you done?"

"I have got a good stock of provisions on hand, so that the men need not leave the mine if they are willing to stay until the trouble is over. We have plenty of arms, have had them all along, as there was supposed to be danger that we might be attacked here by mine-jumpers and the hard cases who are so plentiful about Topnotch. Plenty of arms and ammunition ought to enable us to hold our own against all enemies."

"How about the men?"

"I think they are all right, but will soon make sure of that point. The day shift is going off directly, and the night shift is coming on. I will explain the matter to them, and you will see how they stand."

"That is right, my young friend. Of course you will explain it to them fairly and honestly. Though they may not be willing to fight for the Tycoons, I think they may be depended on to fight for their bread and butter."

The result proved that the old man was right in his conjecture.

When the night shift arrived, Blanton stopped them there, and called out the day shift.

Having collected them near the mouth of the mine, he made a little speech, which was brief, plain, and to the purpose.

"For my part," he said, "I have nothing to do with the fighting or any other trouble that may be taking place in Topnotch to-day, and I don't suppose that you care to mix in it any more than I do. We have our own interests to look after, and our interests are connected just now with this mine and nothing else. I can't pretend to say how things are going on in Topnotch, as I have not heard a word from there; but I have reason to believe that there is danger that some of the roughs and scallwags about here may take advantage of the disturbances to capture the mine and drive us away. Would that sort of thing suit you?"

The response in the negative was unanimous.

"Well, then, there is only one thing for us to do. We must stand together to guard the mine, and beat off any people who may want to steal it. We have plenty of arms and ammunition, as well as enough to eat, and you can cook your coffee or anything else you need to cook right here. Now I want to know whether you will stay here and stand by the mine. If any are not willing to stay, they will please step out and go their way."

Two or three of the miners were more than willing to step out and go, being influenced, probably, by curiosity rather than by any other motive; but they were easily persuaded by the

others to remain, and all declared their purpose of standing by the mine and defending it if necessary.

Burch Blanton then made his arrangements speedily and with excellent judgment—at least, they were highly approved by Timothy Marlow.

Sending a part of the night shift in to work with their foreman, he retained the remainder and the day shift, for whom he found sufficient employment.

Some of them he set at work to cook supper for all who needed it, others he stationed as pickets on the road that led to Topnotch, and with the others he applied himself to the task of strengthening the position and making the most of its advantages.

The works, as the buildings that contained the machinery were called, were located in an open space or basin behind a narrow pass that could easily be defended.

At the head of the pass Blanton caused to be erected a fortification of rock and logs, and on the heights at the sides he stationed riflemen to command the pass and the approach to it.

Supper was then had, and arms and ammunition were served to the men in active service, a supply being reserved for those of the night shift who were at work in the mine.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CRUSHING DEFEAT.

THE cry of "On, to the mine!" which was raised by the mass of the insurrectionists, caused a serious disruption of their ranks and a loss of their coherence as an army.

In fact, from the moment that cry was raised, and the movement toward the mine was begun, they were no better than a mob.

Dan Lasher, who had vainly endeavored to dissuade them from their wild purpose, quitted them in disgust, and they were no longer led by the men who had shown them the way to victory.

There was another important desertion that seriously affected the movement.

The saloonists, believing that they had gained their point by the defeat of the Tycoons, considered the hour of victory a propitious time for a boom in their business.

It did not seem likely to them that the Tycoons would be in any hurry to make another effort to enforce their decree, and in the mean time the prevailing excitement might be expected to cause a strong demand for drinks.

Why should they not profit by it, and gather in the ducats of both factions?

They let the enthusiastic insurrectionists go on to their destruction or otherwise, while they hastened back to their establishments, opened them, lighted them up in the brightest style, and attended to the rush of custom to the best of their ability.

Thus Topnotch was speedily illuminated again, and was in a fair way to resume its normal condition.

As a matter of course, Deadwood Dave and his gang did not go with the crowd that was hurrying away to the mine.

The toughs were attending to their private business when those enterprising citizens had started and had got well away from Topnotch, and no persuasion would have induced them to take part in that movement.

If there was anything of value to be got at the mine, there would be too many to share it, and there was a chance of hard knocks in getting it, which was not at all to the taste of the gang.

They conveyed Simon Marvel as quietly and secretly as possible to Bart McGinley's juicery, where he was closely confined and well guarded.

Deadwood Dave then went out to seek Dan Lasher, and found him at his own place, where the late leader of the insurrectionists was celebrating the victory in the saloon which had lately been a fort.

Dave was invited to help celebrate, partly in consideration of his services in exposing the spy, and he was not the man to refuse to oblige a friend in that way.

Yet, before he had celebrated sufficiently to satisfy him, he felt himself compelled to attend to business, and thereby to establish a new claim upon the gratitude of Handsome Dave.

Accordingly, he tore himself away from the festivities, took the gambler aside, and made an important communication to him.

"While you fellers was chasin' the Tycoons out o' the camp," said he, "me and my pardners was attendin' to business."

"Pickin' up little things?" inquired Dan.

"Pickin' up a big thing, you'd better say."

"We've been makin' a big strike for you."

"What sort of a strike?"

"We've got that Marvel feller."

"What! Jacob Marvel? Have you really captured him?"

"Not the old man, but the young feller, his son."

"His son? Well, that is better than nothing."

"Better'n nothin'? I should say it was a heap better'n nothin'! Jest think how you can twist the inwards out o' the old man if you work the young feller for all he's wu'th."

"You are right, Dave. It is a good catch, and we must keep him. If they try to rough in

on us again, we will work him, as you say, for all he is worth. Where is he now?"

"Down to McGinley's."

"Better bring him up here where he will be safe, and where we can put our hands on him whenever we want to use him."

So Simon Marvel was conveyed to Dan Lasher's place, and Deadwood Dave and his partners were made free of the bar there, of which privilege they availed themselves fully, as became public-spirited citizens.

Thus Topnotch settled down to a condition of comparative equanimity, though there was still an abundance of excitement, and the citizens generally really supposed that there was an end of the trouble that had lately torn up the town.

The trouble, however, had been merely transferred to another quarter, soon to return in full force and renew its former fury.

At the mine Burch Blanton and Timothy Marlow waited and watched for possible foes until they were weary.

They had come to the conclusion that no danger was to be apprehended there, and were about to dispatch a messenger to Topnotch for information of the progress of events, when the trouble began for them.

The pickets who had been stationed down the road came hurrying back to the mine with the news that the enemy was at hand.

This warning, by the way, was not necessary, as the enemy announced their approach by yells and other obstreperous noises that could be heard at a considerable distance.

So the defenders of the mine had plenty of time to prepare for their reception, if any further preparations were required.

"I am so glad that they have come at last," said Burch Blanton, stretching himself until his tall form looked taller than ever.

"Are you really glad?" demanded the old man. "I did not know that you were so fond of a fight."

"Well, I am not fond of a fight—at least, not for the sake of fighting—though I am not likely to run away from one. But it is a relief to know that there is an end of waiting. It seems to me that when one has been expecting a conflict he feels easier when the conflict actually begins."

"For my part, I should think that he would feel easier when it ends, provided that he is not laid out."

Very little further preparation was needed. The defenders of the mine had only to occupy the positions that had been assigned them, and wait a little longer for the onset of the enemy.

Blanton had taken the precaution to establish a pile of materials for a bonfire a little way down the road, and to station a man there to light it if a mob should come in sight.

This was for the purpose of causing the enemy to be clearly visible as they approached, while his men would be concealed and sheltered.

As yet nothing was known at the mine of what had been taking place at Topnotch, and it was only the advent of a mob from that direction which enabled Blanton to guess that disaster had overtaken the Tycoons.

Yet the mob might be, as had been suggested, merely a lot of roughs and rustlers who had taken advantage of the disturbances to strike at the mine.

It was a mob, and nothing but a mob—there was no mistake about that.

Though the men from Topnotch appeared to be numerous enough to eat up the miners if they could get a fair chance at them, they had no organization, military or otherwise, nor any leaders, except such as could yell the loudest and were the most ready to push themselves to the front.

Their expectation was, no doubt, that they would find the mine undefended, and could surprise and capture it.

In this expectation they were disappointed as soon as they caught sight of the bonfire in their path.

The man who had been left in charge there waited until they were dangerously near before he set fire to the pile.

Then having made sure that it would burn, he scudded back to his friends at the top of his speed.

As soon as the fire flashed up, its meaning flashed upon the minds of the mob.

It could mean nothing else than that they were expected, that preparations had been made to receive them, that a surprise was out of the question, and that they would probably have a hard fight before they could get possession of the mine.

This was discouraging to the men who had put themselves forward as leaders, and disheartening to some of their followers.

There were some in the mob who had been brought thither merely by curiosity or the love of excitement, and others who had come in the hope of plunder, but without any expectation of fighting for it.

These adherents might be expected to desert, or at least remain in the rear, if the situation should become serious.

The men at the front, however, excited their comrades by yells and other noisy demonstra-

tions, and not only rushed forward, but fired freely at the brave picket who was running in.

They failed to hit him, as he had chosen his route so as to place trees and other obstructions between him and the flying bullets.

"I am so glad they fired at him," said Blanton.

"Why so?" inquired the old man.

"Because it tells us just what they mean, and now we will not be obliged to order them to halt, or to hold any sort of a parley with them. It is business, now, Mr. Marlow, from the start."

The young engineer attended to it as business, and proceeded to make thorough work of the job he had undertaken.

From the high at the right of the pass he gave the order to fire, and the first shot from that quarter was the signal to the miners on the other side of the pass.

Having instructed the men on the heights to cease firing and join him if the mob should gain shelter by getting inside of the pass, he hastened with Marlow down to the fortification at the rear, which was as yet out of reach of the enemy.

The enemy were not without sense and discretion when they saw the bad box which they were likely to get into.

Perceiving at once that the bonfire, by lighting up their forms, gave their concealed opponents a great advantage, they extinguished it as soon as possible.

It was also evident that if they could get inside of the pass, they would not be so easily reached, if at all, by the fire from the heights, which contained the only foes of whose presence they had yet been made aware.

Therefore they made a rush toward the pass, but a careful and considerate rush, sheltering their advance as well as they could with trees and rocks at the side of the road.

Thus the boldest and most active soon gained the pass without serious loss or injury.

Delighted with the discovery that they could not then be reached from the heights, they shouted to their comrades to come on, and shortly a considerable force was collected near the mouth of the pass.

Knowing that the mine was but a little way beyond them, they rushed for it, but shortly they wished that they had made no such rush.

The pass was so dark that they could not see the fortification beyond until they were close upon it.

Blanton's men, in accordance with his orders, reserved their fire in order to make it effective, and then poured it in so rapidly that the mob were swept away and flung back into the pass.

There was no chance for them to rally, as it was impossible to withstand that murderous fire, especially as the men behind the fortification were being reinforced by their friends who hurried down from the heights.

So they turned tail and ran away.

Blanton perceived the necessity of keeping them on the run, lest they should recover their courage and make a stand at the foot of the pass.

"Come on, boys!" he shouted. "We must drive them off. We must drive them clean off."

They jumped out from their shelter and followed him, their shouts counting as much as their shots in the easy task of keeping their enemies on the run, as the mob scattered toward Topnotch helter-skelter, each striving to be first in the race for safety.

Blanton and Timothy Marlow, who were in the advance of the pursuers, halted when they believed that the pursuit had gone far enough, and consulted as to what they should do next.

The young engineer had hurriedly extracted some information from a wounded man, to the effect that the forces of the Tycoons had been utterly routed, and the leaders were hiding from the vengeance of the insurrectionists.

He concluded that the officers of the mining company were in danger, and that it was his duty to go to their assistance.

That task would of course be an easier one after the crushing defeat of the mob that had set out to capture the mine.

Selecting a few good men who were willing to accompany him, and leaving the others to go about their business, he set out toward Topnotch.

Timothy Marlow insisted on making one of the party, and they kept well in the rear of the disorganized mob which they had defeated.

CHAPTER XXII.

RESURRECTING THE TYCOONS.

PETER GANNON—no more to masquerade in Topnotch as El Paso Pete—was one of those who were the most enraged and humiliated by the defeat of the Tycoons.

In addition to the displeasure that affected him on general principles, he had special reason of his own for anger, as he had been exposed and had narrowly escaped with his life.

It grieved him, too, that he had not been able to inspect the preparations for resistance on the

floor below the room where he met with disaster and had therefore been unable to inform his friends of the danger that awaited them there.

Consequently they rushed into the jaws of the tiger, which closed on them and crushed them.

Pete Gannon felt that he had failed in his main duty as a spy, and that his failure, with its accompanying humiliation and danger, were due to Dan Lasher, against whom he cherished a grudge which he was anxious to work out.

Though he was as brave as a man need to be, he did not stay behind as a rear guard when his comrades ran away, nor had he previously been eager to expose himself to any peril that might as well be avoided.

He was firmly of the opinion that "he who fights and runs away" may live to work out his grudges at a more convenient season, and therefore he fled as soon and as swiftly as the others when it was evident that the party of the Tycoons had got the worst of the battle.

Wishing to keep himself posted as far as possible concerning the subsequent events, he found a hiding-place from which, while he ran no risk of discovery, he could see and hear at least a part of what was going on.

He heard the cry of "On, to the mine!" and knew what it meant, and could make a pretty good guess at what happened after that.

As matters became quiet in the neighborhood of his place of concealment, he sallied forth, discovering that the town had been partially lighted again, and was resuming its ordinary aspect.

Going about carefully in search of his friends, he came across Ben Eagleson, the marshal, who was on a similar quest.

Together they sought Jacob Marvel and the superintendent, whom they succeeded in finding, but advised them to remain where they were for the present.

Then they sallied forth again, a little bolder than before, to try to get their friends together and inform themselves of the situation of affairs.

Having got a pretty fair idea of the events that had occurred since the defeat, and having picked up a few of those who had fought and run away, they returned to where they had left the chief Tycoons.

Both were greatly depressed by the defeat and by the intelligence that was brought to them, and it was not long before their depression was increased.

"If those rascals have got hold of the mine," said the superintendent, "that will make things very bad for us."

"What good will it do them," inquired Gannon, "if they can't keep it and work it?"

"It may not do them much good, but may do us much harm."

"Mr. Blanton is there," observed Jacob Marvel, "and there are plenty of arms and ammunition for the miners."

"But they may not care to fight for the mine, and it is not at all likely that they expected any attack from Topnotch. It was generally understood that we were going to succeed in what we undertook to do, and I told Blanton myself that we were sure to carry it through."

"We have made a great mistake somewhere, and I suppose we overestimated our ability. But I am glad that Blanton did not come to Topnotch to help us, as he is sure to be of more use at the mine. I have great confidence in that young man."

"I hope he deserves it," remarked Eagleson, rather despondently.

"Well, we must do the best we can with affairs as we find them, and the first thing to do is to go to the office and see if that is all right. I told my son to stay there and take charge of things; but of course he could not be expected to stand off a mob. I hope he has kept out of the trouble."

They did not find the office all right—quite the contrary.

The door was wide open, and Simon Marvel was not there, and the scene of wreck and ruin was decidedly discouraging.

The safe in which the valuables were kept was intact, but it was evident that some of the insurrectionists had been in possession, and that they had vented their spite upon everything they could get at.

Jacob Marvel was sadly troubled by his anxiety concerning the fate of his son, the only certainty being that Simon had not been killed on the spot.

"I hope that the boy was able to get away before they came here," he said, but was obliged to admit that his hope lacked much of being a settled belief.

Ben Eagleson suggested that it was about time for the arrival of the valley men who had been sent for, and that the best thing to do just then was to go and meet their friends.

With the aid of the recruits from Tolbert, and in the absence of a large body of the insurrectionists, they might be able to take the town again and hold it against their enemies.

So the defeated men who had been collected

there set out, leaving Topnotch quietly and unobtrusively, as they did not consider themselves strong enough to risk a row.

Indeed, it must be admitted that their departure looked a good deal like sneaking away.

Fortune favored them, and Ben Eagleson's calculations proved to be correct.

They had gone not more than a mile down the road that led to the valley, when they met the friends they were looking for.

The Tolbert contingent was even larger than it had been expected to be, as the men down there were anxious to rescue or avenge their comrades who had met with disaster.

Therefore the spirits of the Tycoons rose rapidly, as they began to believe that they would be able to retrieve their fallen fortunes.

Ben Eagleson put himself at the head of the combined forces, and marched them back toward Topnotch.

On the way they struck a portion of the disorganized and demoralized mob that had been driven back from the mine.

Scarcely knowing who they were, and of course not understanding the disaster that had happened to them, but having no doubt that they were enemies, the marshal ordered a charge, and the insurrectionists, surprised by the unexpected attack, were easily routed and scattered.

Burch Blanton and his miners, with Timothy Marlow, hearing the noise of firing, hurried forward and joined their friends.

Blanton related the occurrences at the mine, and was highly complimented by Jacob Marvel, who was more than glad to learn that the attempt of the insurrectionists in that quarter had failed so completely.

The Tycoons, again triumphant, and elated by their easy victory, chased their foes into the town—those of them, at least, who had not escaped in other directions.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"A FOUL GRIP."

THE return of the remnant of the mob that had gone out to capture the mine spread consternation among the insurrectionists who had remained in Topnotch.

Though Dan Lasher and the other cool heads had regarded the expedition to the mine as a rash and hair-brained piece of business, they had supposed that the fighting was over, that they had gained their point, and that it would be a long time, if ever, before the defeated Tycoons would make another serious effort to molest them.

Consequently their surprise was complete when the broken mob came scampering into town with the news not only of severe punishment at the mine, but also of pursuit by a large force of their foes.

No doubt they exaggerated the numbers of those who were pursuing them, but the actual state of affairs was bad enough.

Messengers were at once sent to the saloon-keepers, informing them of the change in the situation; but it was scarcely to be supposed that they could get ready in time to meet the expected onset, even if they should be willing to close up and take part in the fight again.

The headquarters of the insurgents were still at Dan Lasher's establishment, and many of them were gathered there when the news of disaster arrived.

Among them were Deadwood Dave and his partners, who were still enjoying the festivities of the occasion.

Handsome Dan's whisky had worked them up to the fighting pitch, judging by their talk; yet it was not likely that they could be depended on when the pinch came.

Dan Lasher was the man for the emergency.

He took in the necessities of the case at a glance, and speedily determined upon a plan of action.

If he and his friends should not be able to whip the Tycoons again, and it seemed likely just then that they would not be, he could at least bring them to a halt and worry them into a compromise, thanks to the fine work of Deadwood Dave in getting possession of Simon Marvel.

That young man could be used not only as a hostage, but in a more aggressive manner, and it was the intention of those who held him to work him for all he was worth.

Handsome Dan began this second campaign by making a bold move.

He was determined to let his enemies know at once that he was not to be scared, and that he held the whip hand.

Therefore, instead of shutting his men up in the house and fighting from that fortress, he ordered them all into the street, and arranged them there in battle array.

As fast as the defeated members of the mine expedition came in he caused them to be rallied, refreshed in the manner that was most satisfactory to them, and formed behind his fresher and more reliable forces.

Thus the insurrectionists showed quite a formidable front when the victorious Tycoons arrived.

The most important measure, however, was

the disposition that was made of Simon Marvel.

He was also brought out into the street, and a noose was knotted in a sufficient rope, and he was led under a tree that conveniently stood in front of the next building to Lasher's place.

"What do you mean? What are you going to do with me?" demanded the young man when he perceived these ominous preparations, and understood that they were made with reference to him.

"Likely as not we are going to hang you," replied Dan. "If your father and his folds don't clear out and leave us alone, we are certain to do that very thing."

Simon turned pale when this dismal prospect was disclosed to him; but he was by no means so much of a coward as some of his captors might have supposed him to be, and he braced up with the determination of going through his part of the performance like a man.

"I hope they will kill the last one of you," said he. "I don't care what becomes of me, and such scamps as you are too mean to live."

"You talk big for a tenderfoot," observed Dan; "but I reckon you will be glad to climb down a peg or two when the rope begins to draw."

This matter was soon to be brought to a test, as Jacob Marvel and his aids, with their new allies from Tolbert, and the remains of the former force whom they had got together, speedily appeared on the scene.

About the first move made by the Tycoons on their return to Topnotch was to send emissaries to the saloon-keepers, warning them to keep out of the fight, and promising them protection if they would stay at home and mind their own business.

Between these emissaries and those of the other side, the puzzled saloonists hardly knew how to act; but they were doing a big business just then, which they were unwilling to drop, and the Lasher party might not win, and the promise of protection was something better than they had looked for.

If their ox was not to be gored, why need they bother about other people's cattle?

Jacob Marvel had been quite unwilling to make this concession to the saloonists, and had done so only when its absolute necessity was impressed upon him; but, when he saw how formidable his foes yet appeared to be, he did not regret the sacrifice if it would secure his forces from an attack in the rear.

Though the Tycoons believed that victory was then within their grasp, their opponents were evidently so strong and so confident of their strength, that it was deemed best not to rush upon them too suddenly, thus running the risk of an ambush or some other unexpected stroke of strategy.

It would at least be advisable to summon them to surrender and give the affair a chance to terminate peaceably.

So Ben Eagleson, acting under the instructions of his chiefs, hailed them, and, in effect, read the riot act to them; but they did not disperse.

Dan Lasher's full and rich tones rung out loud and clear as he answered the hail.

"Is Jacob Marvel there?"

"Yes," answered the marshal.

"Tell him that he had better go slow, or he will put his foot in the fire, and will have no chance to get it out."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Tell him that we have no notion of surrendering or backing down an inch. We know our rights, and mean to stick to 'em. We have whipped your crowd once, and can whip them again if we want to; but we know an easier way than fighting to settle this difficulty. Tell Jacob Marvel that we've got a foul grip on him."

"What's your foul grip?" demanded Ben Eagleson after a consultation with his chief.

"We've got his son here, and we mean to keep him, dead or alive, until this thing is settled. You must leave us alone, and agree to keep on leaving us alone, or we will string him up to this tree, and then we will fight you to the death if you want."

This was a serious statement, and it was clear enough that Dan Lasher meant what he said.

That sort of a "foul grip" was the very thing that Jacob Marvel had feared.

Whether the statement was true was the only question, and it was one that could not be determined by the sense of sight.

If there was any doubt on that point in the minds of Simon Marvel's friends, it was speedily settled by the young man himself.

He shouted at the top of his voice, as much with the purpose of concealing a possible trembling of his speech, as for the sake of making himself heard.

"Never mind me! Pitch in and clean the scoundrels out!"

That was all he said, and it was to be inferred that summary measures had been taken to quiet him.

Jacob Marvel was almost stunned by the realization of his fears.

Though it must be admitted that Simon had proved his bravery in declaring his willingness

to sacrifice himself for the success of his friends, yet no such sacrifice could be permitted.

Jacob Marvel admired his boy then as he had never before admired him, but was not enough of a Roman father to consent that he should be slaughtered.

Simon could only be rescued by the defeat of the insurgents, and it could not be doubted that an attack would lead to his instant execution.

Before the attack could possibly succeed, he would be dead.

The President of the Topnotch Mining Company was badly broken up by the situation as it was presented to him.

To yield to the demands of the insurgents, and to abandon the cherished plans which he had prosecuted at such a cost in the interests of morality would be a terrible thing; but to lose his only son would be much worse.

Yet something must be done, or left undone, and it was at all events necessary to delay military operations until he could see what sort of a bargain might be struck with Dan Lasher.

Consequently the leader of the insurrectionists was informed that a truce would be declared, and that the matters of difference between the two parties would be fairly considered.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TYCOONS ON TOP.

THE truce was mainly for the purpose of gaining time, though Jacob Marvel might have confessed that he had no idea of any special benefit that was to be derived from gaining time.

Ben Eagleson, however, who had proposed the arrangement, believed that it would be of use, and he hastened to get his work in.

"If I had two or three good men, just such men as I want," said he, "I think that we could get out of this scrape."

"What's the matter with me?" inquired Burch Blanton.

"I am getting to be an old man, but am pretty good yet," observed Timothy Marlow.

"If your idea is what I guess it is," remarked Marvin Briggs, "I want to be counted in the game."

Marvin Briggs, as it happened, was the proprietor of the store adjoining Dan Lasher's place, in front of which Simon Marvel was stationed under the tree.

Ben Eagleson turned to him quickly.

"I reckon you have guessed it," said the marshal. "As there is a risk to your property, I was in no hurry to call on you."

Briggs had joined the Tycoons, and had stuck to them firmly, in spite of the danger that might come to his business and his place of business from the proximity of Lasher's establishment.

He was not going to draw back or shrink at that crisis.

"That is all right," said he. "I am willing to risk my property, and you needn't worry about it."

"Have you got your keys with you?" inquired Eagleson.

"Both of them, front and back. I guessed your idea, you see, because I had a notion of trying to work the same scheme. What you want to do, as I take it, is to circle around to the back door of my place, go through, and rush out at the front, taking those scamps by surprise, and snatching the young feller away from them. Is that the game?"

"You have hit it exactly, Marvin, and we must be quick about it, too, as those men may not be quiet much longer."

"Come on, then. The sooner it is over, the better for all of us."

But, before Ben Eagleson could make a move, he was obliged to get the consent of Jacob Marvel, whose son was exposed to danger, and might be brought into greater peril by the bold step that was contemplated.

The chief of the Tycoons turned pale when this proposition was made to him; for he realized the position of his only son.

At the same time he was bitterly opposed to yielding an inch to the demands of the insurgents, and he hoped that the daring attempt might prove successful.

After a brief hesitation he gave his consent, and Ben Eagleson set at work immediately with the three men who had offered themselves.

They were all recognized as good and determined men, in spite of the advanced years of the Mad Parson, and Marvin Briggs would be specially useful on account of his familiarity with his own place of business.

It was arranged that there should be a conference with the insurgents, and that the attempt to rescue Simon Marvel should be made while the conference was being held.

The Tycoons in the street, ready for any emergency, were to watch closely the front of Marvin Briggs's store, and, as soon as the rescuing party rushed forth, were to make a diversion in their favor.

As a matter of course, this would be an utterly inexcusable breaking of the truce; but the Tycoons had suffered so severely, and had been so deeply humiliated, that their ideas of military honor had been decidedly lowered.

Furthermore, they were inclined to consider the rescuing party as a "side issue," and were

not to renew the fight unless the rescuers were in need of help.

The real fact was, however, that they believed in the maxim, "everything is fair in war," and had no doubt that their adversaries would take a similar advantage of them if they saw a chance to do so.

As soon as the conference had been arranged, Ben Eagleson started off with his three men, armed only with their revolvers, as the work which they might have to do was expected to be close and desperate.

As Briggs had suggested, they "circled around" until they reached the rear of his store.

All was quiet there, and the darkness was intense, as the night was nearly spent, leaving only what is commonly known as "the darkest hour, just before dawn."

Marvin Briggs let his confederates in at the back door, and led them through the establishment.

Nothing had been disturbed there, as the insurgents had shown no disposition to destroy property; but, if the attack that was about to be made upon them should prove immediately and thoroughly successful, it might be expected that Marvin Briggs's store would be quickly and completely gutted.

No lamp or candle was lighted, and not even a match was struck, as it was above all things important that the desperate attempt should be secretly made.

Noiselessly the four men felt their way through the thick darkness until they reached the front door.

They had carefully noted the location of the tree and Simon Marvel with regard to the door, as well as the position of the men they were to attack, and each of the four understood the work that he would be expected to do.

Quietly Marvin Briggs's key turned in the lock, the door was suddenly thrown open, and the rescuing party rushed forth.

Briggs stopped an instant to close and lock the door, but immediately joined Blanton and the Mad Parson, who had opened a rapid fire with their revolvers as soon as they emerged from the building.

Ben Eagleson, who was a tall and stalwart man, of great strength and activity, knocking down or throwing aside the few who stood in his way, ran to Simon Marvel.

With a sharp knife he cut the rope, and gave the bewildered young man a push in the direction of his friends, bidding him run for his life, and following him up to protect him from recapture.

This sudden and unexpected attack, was of course a complete surprise to the insurgents, and for the moment it demoralized and scattered them; but they quickly rallied, and proceeded to make it hot for the desperate few who had ventured among them.

Their assailants, however, scarcely gave them time to rally.

Fully realizing the fact that their chances of success and safety lay in the rush, they only waited until Ben Eagleson had cut loose the captive, and had scarcely a second to wait for that.

Then they burst through the ranks of their opponents, and headed toward their friends.

It was every man for himself, according to the programme which they had agreed on and each struck out on his own hook, without waiting to see what had become of his comrades.

As the insurgents had been quietly awaiting the result of the conference that had been going on between the lines, they were naturally highly indignant at this treacherous attack.

They quickly recovered from their momentary panic, and pistol bullets began to fly about in the liveliest manner possible; but they came very near being too late.

Timothy Marlow's long strides carried him swiftly out of the way of the greatest danger; but the other three suffered more or less in the *melee*.

Ben Eagleson, who was covering the escape of Simon Marvel, received a severe wound in his left arm, and Martin Briggs was shot dead, pierced by more than one bullet.

Burch Blanton was lucky enough to escape with a slight flesh wound, which he considered nothing more than a scratch.

It is probable that not one of them would have got away alive, if it had not been for the prompt action of their friends.

Utterly disregarding the truce, and not waiting for the response of the insurgents to the sudden attack, the myrmidons of the Tycoons, led by Pete Gannon, started into the fight as soon as the rescuing party issued from the store.

Under these circumstances the fighting, as might have been expected, speedily terminated in favor of the Tycoons.

There was no tribunal to which their opponents could appeal for protection against that atrocious violation of the laws of war, and their only chance was to strike a stout blow for revenge, and then get out of the scrape as well as they could.

The blow was not signally effective, as they were badly disorganized and demoralized.

For a little while there was some pretty sharp

fighting; but it was only by squads or individuals who had been cornered, as the insurgents were split up and scattered.

Dan Lasher kept about him the only compact body, a dozen or more of the best men on his side, who followed him into the saloon in his establishment, where several others had gathered, including Deadwood Dave and his gang, who were trying to keep out of the way of bullets.

As the inside fortification was still there, it was at once made available to keep back their enemies; but the Tycoons had once before discovered what it amounted to, and, though then victorious, they were in no hurry to tackle it.

Dan Lasher, perceiving that he had at least a brief respite, hurried up-stairs, stuffed his money and valuables into a bag, and hastily made his arrangements for retreating from the field which was then clearly lost.

Those arrangements he communicated to a few faithful friends, who were to be allowed to accompany him if they chose to do so, and they gladly availed themselves of the privilege.

One by one they sneaked out of the back door, and speedily put a safe distance between themselves and Topnotch.

Those who were not so deeply compromised also sneaked out, but did not trouble themselves to go so far, being content to keep out of the way until the storm blew over.

When daylight came, and the Tycoons attacked the headquarters of the rebellion, they found nobody in the saloon but the barkeeper and a few customers who were unable to carry their loads of whisky.

CHAPTER XXV.

TRAITOROUS TOUGHS.

AMONG those who "scattered out" from Topnotch, after the victory of the Tycoons, were Deadwood Dave and his gang.

They were not invited by Dan Lasher to accompany him in his flight, not being regarded as faithful, or in any respect valuable allies, and they did not, in fact, accompany him; but they took the same direction, and ultimately arrived at the same destination.

They fully realized the fact that Topnotch was no longer—at least not for a considerable length of time—a safe abiding-place for them.

If there had been nothing against them but the quiet and inconspicuous part they played in the insurrection, they would have had no need to trouble themselves about the consequences, as they might have slipped into obscurity, and the chances were that they would not have been noticed or thought of; but they had sense enough to know that they had compromised themselves pretty deeply.

Though they had not been able to fulfill their expectation of picking up unwatched bits of property during the turmoil, they had effected the capture of Simon Marvel, the son of the Chief of the Tycoons.

By turning their prisoner over to Dan Lasher's party, they had put his life in peril, thereby incurring the enmity of his father and friends.

The act which they fancied would operate greatly to their advantage had proved to be a boomerang.

Simon Marvel would of course denounce them as the scoundrels who had got him into trouble, and they might expect immediate vengeance to be visited upon them.

Dan Lasher ought to be friendly to them, as they had surely done him a good turn by putting him in possession of young Marvel, and it was no fault of theirs that the scheme had not worked well.

In their opinion the gambler was bound to take care of them, or to help them, and they meant to follow him up and stick to him as long as he had a dollar.

Handsome Dan had found a snug and reasonably secure retreat in the hills, at a little settlement, if it might be so called, of unsettled men who were not noted for obedience to the laws.

Among those reprobates, who were glad enough to get hold of him, he assumed the leadership at once, by virtue of his superior intelligence and ability, as well as because of his money.

Having thus established himself, he proceeded to enlist recruits, and to meditate schemes of revenge upon the Tycoons and all his enemies in Topnotch.

When Deadwood Dave and his three comrades joined this society, they were not warmly welcomed.

It was known that they could not be depended on for such work as was wanted, and that they represented merely an undesirable addition of four hungry and thirsty stomachs, thirst being mainly what was the matter with them.

Though Dan Lasher treated the Topnotch toughs decently, feeling that he was in a manner responsible for their flight, there were plenty of others who slighted and snubbed them, giving them to understand in many ways that they were regarded as incumbrances.

Something more than slights and snubs was needed to make existence a misery to them, and the something more was furnished by a short allowance of liquors.

With the aid of Dan Lasher's money, it was no difficult matter for the outlaw colony to get plenty of food and drink, and all who wanted it were well supplied with whisky, except the Topnotch toughs, whose rations were much smaller than they wished them to be.

This destitution begot in them a spirit of rebellion, and among themselves they grumbled at what they considered bad treatment, though they made no loud complaint openly.

"I don't mean to stand this no longer," said Deadwood Dave to Bad Lands Ben. "We got ourselves into a scrape by tryin' to help Dan Lasher and the other fellers, and, instid o' pomperin' us up as they ort to do, they treat us wuss'n dogs."

"What can we do about it?" inquired Ben. "You an' I can jest light out o' here, and go off on our own hook."

"Whar can we go to? Topnotch is shet up ag'in us."

"I ain't sure that it is. It's my notion that the best thing we can do is to go back thar, and that we can make the move pay, too."

"Thar's some sort of a scheme workin' in your head, Dave. What is it?"

"It's jest this: The Tycoons naterally want to know whar Dan Lasher is hidin', and what kind of a game he is up to. We can give 'em those p'int's, and that ain't all we can do."

"What more?"

"We can show 'em how to find and gobble up Handsome Dan and as many of his pard's as they want. If that ain't wu'th money, and won't fetch money, I'm foolin' myself."

"Why, Dave, that would make us traitors to our friends."

"Friends? Purty sort o' friends! It's they that's been traitors to us. The way we've been treated is a sin and a shame. I'd ruther be killed than starved to death, anyhow. As public-sperrited citizens, we've got a duty to do, an' we must pitch in an' do it."

"I reckon you're right, Dave, and I reely hope that we won't be jumpin' out o' the fryin'-pan into the fire. I will be mighty glad to git safe back to Bart McGinley's, and so will our pard's."

"Thar ain't no pard's in this but us, Ben. The scheme will float us two easy enough, I reckon; but it mought not hold up any more. When we git back to Topnotch, and make ourselves solid with the Tycoons, then we'll see what we can do for the others; but jest now it stands us in hand to look out for ourselves."

"That looks to be kinder rough on the boys; but you've got a great head, Dave, and I reckon it's all for the best."

That night Deadwood Dave and Bad Lands Ben slipped out of the camp and started for Topnotch.

They might as well have gone openly and in the daytime, as nobody wanted to keep them there, and there was no regret at their departure, except on the part of the two comrades whom they had left behind, deserted, but not forsaken.

When they "showed up" in Topnotch the next morning, they were introduced to the Tycoons somewhat sooner than they had expected.

Simon Marvel saw and recognized them, and pointed them out to Ben Eagleson, who arrested them, and they made no attempt at resistance.

The marshal conveyed them at once to the headquarters of the Tycoons, who had established a sort of martial law in Topnotch since their final victory.

"What does this mean?" grumpily demanded Deadwood Dave, when he was arraigned before the magnates. "We are peaceable and public-sperrited citizens, and we ain't doin' no harm. I'd like to know what we've been jerked up for."

"Do you see that young gentleman?" replied the marshal, pointing at Simon Marvel.

"Yes, I see him. I know him well. He's a nice young gentleman."

"You are accused of having kidnapped him during the recent disturbances here, and of having put him where he was in peril of his life. He would have met his death by hanging, if he had not been rescued by his friends."

"It ain't really possible that you mean to bring that up ag'in us!" protested Dave. "That warn't nothing but a joke. We didn't harm the young feller, and never meant to harm him. He was took away from us, and we ain't to blame for what happened arter that. If thar was any harm in that little trick, we've got news for you that'll pay for it, and a heap more'n pay for it."

"What is your news?" inquired Eagleson.

"We are two public-sperrited citizens, meanin' no harm, and wantin' to do our dooty and the far thing, and we've come here, lookin' for no trouble, to bring you some news that ort to be wu'th a heap to you."

"What is it, then? Don't keep us waiting."

"We can show you whar Handsome Dan Lasher and his pard's are hidin' and tell you what sort of a game they are up to, and put you onto 'em so's you can gobble 'em all up, or as many of 'em as you want, and that's a deal that we allow to be wu'th somethin'."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THEIR JUST REWARD.

HAVING announced his offer, Deadwood Dave looked around upon the committee with an air of triumph, as if he believed that he had them just where he wanted them.

Ben Eagleson, however, who acted as spokesman of the committee, gave the Topnotch tough a glance of contempt, and followed it up with a cold reply that speedily reduced the temperature of the big bully.

"If I understand you right," said the marshal, "you propose to betray your friends, and you want to be paid for it."

"They ain't no friends o' mine!" gruffly answered Dave.

"How much do you think that job ought to be worth?"

"We allow, as I said, that it ort to be wu'th a heap to you folks."

"Well, Mr. Deadbeat Dave, the solemn fact is that it is not worth a red cent to us."

"Not wu'th—"

"Not worth anything at all. We won't have it at any price. You have brought your mangy pigs to the wrong market. You have given yourself away, without the faintest chance of getting anything in return. We don't want those men."

"Don't want those men?" stammered Dave.

"Don't want Dan Lasher and his pard's?"

He was so surprised and discomfited, that he could not do justice to the subject, or find any suitable expression for his astonishment.

"We don't want those men," repeated Ben Eagleson. "We have no use for them at all. Having got them off our hands, we are glad to be rid of them, and only hope that we may never see them again."

Deadwood Dave looked around at the rest of the persons present, with a sorrowful, all-broke-up gaze, but saw no sign of any dissent from the opinion expressed by the marshal.

"That beats me," he muttered. "Well, Ben, as these folks don't seem to be such public-sperrited citizens as we had allowed they mought be, I reckon we'd better jog along."

"Don't be in a hurry," interposed Ben Eagleson, as the two toughs started to leave the room.

"I think we can find a use for you."

"As how?" inquired Dave, rather dubiously.

"As an example and a warning to other public-sperrited citizens of your stripe."

"Seems like I don't ketch on to that kind of a scheme."

"I think you will ketch onto it before long, or it will ketch onto you—that is, if Jack Ketch is alive and able to attend to business. We did not want the men you proposed to sell to us. We would not have gone ten steps out of our way to take the whole batch of them. But we did want you, and we have got you, and we mean to keep you."

"What for?"

"There is a serious charge against you—a charge of attempted murder."

"We ain't murdered nobody," protested Ben Staples, who had been viewing the position of affairs with gradually increasing alarm.

"But you started in to murder him. You did all you dared to do in that way. You gobbled him up and turned him over to those men, and it was no fault of yours that he escaped from being killed."

"That warn't nothin' but a joke," pitifully declared Deadwood Dave. "We didn't harm the young feller, and he was took away from us."

"That is what you told us a while ago, and we believe you now, just as much as we believed you then. Well, Mr. Deadbeat Dave, you shall have a fair trial, with no reason to complain of being kept waiting."

Deadwood Dave and Bad Lands Ben, in spite of their protests and entreaties, were effectually prevented from leaving the room, and it became evident to them that they had made a bad move and were playing a losing game, with their lives for the stakes.

Ben Staples looked mournfully and reproachfully at his partner, whose pigheaded stupidity had got them both into that scrape, and the big bully sat with eyes cast down, dumfounded by the unexpected turn the affair had taken.

A jury of the Lynch variety was speedily impaneled, and no person was appointed to preside in lieu of a judge, as the jury was supposed to furnish its own law.

Ben Eagleson prosecuted the prisoners, who were expected to conduct their own defense, and the summary trial proceeded.

Simon Marvel was of course the main witness, relating how Deadwood Dave and his gang had entered the office of the mining company when he was there alone, had vainly tried to open the safe, had searched for valuables, wrathy because they found nothing, had vented their anger on the furniture, and had forcibly taken him away, bound and helpless.

He went on to tell how they had conveyed him to Bart McGinley's, where they had deprived him of his money and watch, besides subjecting him to insult and injury, and had finally turned him over to Dan Lasher, by whom he was threatened with death, and he had

no doubt that he would have been hung if he had not been rescued by his friends.

"Did we hurt you?" demanded Deadwood Dave when he cross-examined the witness.

"You did not kill me; but you did what I have said you did."

"Warn't you took away from from us by Dan Lasher's crowd?"

"I was not," Simon answered positively.

"You took me to them, and handed me over to them, and I heard you say that you were going to do that very thing and make the move pay you."

There was no getting over such evidence as that, and Dave could only protest that he and his partners "didn't kill nobody, and didn't want to kill nobody."

Ben Eagleson wanted to put in evidence the previous character of the accused, offering to bring plenty of witnesses to prove that they were scallawags of the first whisky-and-water; but the jury would have none of it, declaring that they needed no further satisfaction on that point.

Deadwood Dave, however, wanted to prove the good character of himself and his partners, and insisted that Bart McGinley should be called to testify for them.

That juicy proprietor was not regarded by the citizens there present as a valuable witness for anybody; but his attendance was procured, after some delay, and he was asked what he knew of the character of the two accused persons.

If Deadwood Dave supposed, and he doubtless did, that this side partner of his was going to try to get him and Ben Staples out of their scrape, he was then to learn that white men are not always to be depended on—in fact, that they are "mighty onart'in."

Bart McGinley looked at the pair indifferently at first, as if he took no large amount of stock in them, and then his rugged countenance assumed a decided expression of displeasure.

"I won't say nothin' ag'inst 'em," he answered, "and I can't say that I've got any good to say for 'em. They owe me a pile o' money for whisky, and I reckon the bill won't never be no smaller, whether they live or die. If they should live, it would stand a chance to grow. So it don't make no differ to me how fast you go on with the funeral."

This was a crushing blow to the accused.

That their life or death should be a matter of such little concern to one whom they had long regarded as a partner, and that their whisky should be so cold-bloodedly brought up against them in that emergency, was enough to destroy their confidence in human nature.

Worse was to come, as McGinley, when he was pressed by the prosecution, admitted that he had heard the gang talking about handing Simon Marvel over to Dan Lasher, and that he knew that they had taken the young gentleman away from his place for that purpose.

This ended the evidence, and the jury retired for consultation.

Deadwood Dave was too badly stupefied to make any further plea in his own behalf, and Bad Lands Ben, who was very stupid by nature, was only able to reproach his partner for having got them into such a scrape.

The consultation was brief, and the jury, when they came in, had the appearance of men who had made up their minds to do a duty which was not altogether disagreeable.

"We've got the thing settled, gentlemen," said the man who acted as foreman.

"What is your verdict?" asked Ben Eagleson.

"We are agreed that those men are guilty of what has been charged against them."

"What is your sentence, then?"

"On general principles, as well as for that job, we think they deserve hangin', and the sooner they're strung up, the better for them, as well as for all the rest of us."

The accused did not see any sense in saying that hanging would be better for them.

Deadwood Dave burst out in a howl, pleading abjectly for his life, and Ben Staples was so badly broken up that he could not even utter an entreaty.

Neither noise nor silence could then be of any avail, as sentence had been passed, and there was no appeal to delay its execution.

The two toughs were taken about half a mile outside of the town, and there, in broad daylight, in the presence of the jury and numerous spectators, were duly hanged upon separate trees with ropes that had been provided for the purpose.

Timothy Marlow was the chaplain of the occasion, and he prayed for them, as a bystander remarked, "for all it was worth."

"I knew it must come to this," said the Mad Parson. "I told them that I would live to see them hanged."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SUSIE PLAYS THE SPY.

If the Tycoons did not soon begin to believe that they had made a mistake in their violent efforts to improve the morals of Topnotch, there were plenty of other people who easily arrived at that opinion.

The camp might have become moral, but was

surely a great deal duller, and the dullness seriously affected its customary business.

A large part of its attractiveness having been done away with, there was less inducement than previously for outsiders, as well as less comfort and consolation for the residents.

The gambling establishments and music and dance halls, which, with big resources of kerosene and naphtha, had supplied so much of the nightly illumination of Topnotch, were deserted and dark, none of them having been occupied since their proprietors were driven away.

A pervasive or permanent gloom would have settled down upon the camp, if it had not been for the whisky shops, which were enjoying an unprecedented rush of business.

It looked as if everybody, with the exception of a few of the Tycoons, had taken to drink, and this was just what might have been expected.

Men who had been in the habit of dropping into Dan Lasher's, for instance, to feed the tiger with a few coins, or seating themselves in a music hall where their potations were moderate, had nothing but the whisky-shops to fall back on when those means of relaxation and amusement were shut off.

The consequence was that they drank deeply and recklessly, and the saloonists, looking ahead to a rainy day for themselves, economized in the quality of the liquor they sold, and were not a bit liberal in their expenditures.

Another consequence was that drunkenness and rowdyism thrived in Topnotch to an extent that had never been known there before.

At night the main street and the saloons were filled with a howling mob, excited by the worst kind of fighting whisky, and citizens who were inclined to be peaceable did not dare to venture out.

Street fights and bar-room brawls had never been half so frequent, nor anything like so vicious.

The utmost efforts of Marshal Eagleson and the force at his disposal could not check the rioting, and the rioters were so numerous that it was idle even to think of punishing them.

Ben Eagleson shrunk appalled from the state of affairs that had arisen in Topnotch, feeling himself incapable of dealing with it, and the Tycoons, whose well meant endeavors to benefit the community against its will had produced the disorders, leaned back in their arm-chairs, and wondered what had got into the people.

What must have troubled Jacob Marvel more than anything else was the attitude of the miners.

As it was necessary to rely on them for working the mine whose destiny he controlled, what they did or left undone was a matter of importance.

What they did was to grumble, and most of them grumbled loudly, at being shut off from their accustomed recreation.

They insisted upon their right to spend their money as they chose, and to use their spare time to please themselves.

They uttered their sentiments freely in the presence of Burch Blanton and the foreman, and were only too glad to get a chance to speak plainly where the president and the superintendent could hear them.

What they left undone, when it was apparent that grumbling would avail them nothing, was the work of the mine.

All of them did not quit; but several threw up their jobs in disgust, and others did their work, to say the best of it, very irregularly, and thus the mine was short-handed, and affairs proceeded slowly just when they should have been moving briskly.

It may be added that those who quit work became the worst of the roisterers and rioters in Topnotch.

This condition of affairs was reported to Dan Lasher, who had his spies and friends in the camp, and it prompted him to take the aggressive and renew the war.

Among those who reported to him were a few of the disbanded miners, and from them he got the idea which he went to work on.

As the mine was short-handed, it must be poorly guarded.

As the men who were still at work were known to be disaffected, it was to be presumed that they would not take a lively interest in defending the property of the company which had so seriously interfered with their few pleasures.

This gave the outlaws a chance to strike a blow at the Tycoons which would wound them in the weakest part.

It seemed that by a sudden and secret attack they might capture the mine, and they saw no reason why they should not then hold it until they could force Jacob Marvel and his associates to make terms with them.

Having discussed this plan among themselves, and having determined to put it in operation at once, they left their camp and started down the mountain.

When they were not far from the mine, they stopped in a little glen to fortify themselves with food, for which purpose they built a fire.

As they had plenty of time, not wishing to reach their destination too soon, they dallied over the meal, and had a comfortable smoke while they settled the details of the enterprise.

It happened that Susie Marlow was on her way from Topnotch that day, as even she could not exist without an occasional shopping excursion.

She was alone, and was riding an Indian pony that had been trained for her by Cæsar, the dwarf.

Susie caught sight of wreaths of smoke rising above the trees, and the habits of her mountain life, as well as her natural curiosity, caused her to regard the smoke as something suspicious.

She dismounted, hitched her pony, and quietly and cautiously made her way to the glen.

Looking down, she was surprised to see a number of armed men in the hollow, some of whom she knew by sight, and she was sure that they were there for no good.

While some of them were eating, others were smoking, and several were talking, and what Susie heard of their talk induced her to endeavor to approach them more closely, so that she might the better listen to it.

Creeping down the side of the glen, at the risk of dislodging a stone or otherwise betraying her presence, she secured a location behind a rock, where she could hear as well as see most of what was going on below.

The talk was loud enough, in all conscience, as even Dan Lasher, under the influence of whisky or some other excitement, had raised his voice.

Thus she became informed of the fact that the party intended to capture the Topnotch mine, and learned that they expected to accomplish that object before nightfall.

Having gained that knowledge, she wanted to retire from her position, in order that she might hurry back to the mine and carry the news to Burch Blanton; but something happened that bothered her just then.

Her petted pony, feeling the lack of his mistress, and wondering why she did not come back to him, whinnied for her, and that sound raised an excitement at once.

The outlaws, fearful of the approach of somebody, started to their feet, and looked in the direction from which the sound came.

Susie Marlow, at the same instant, anxious to hurry away from there, missed her footing and would have fallen down into the glen if she had not caught at the rock that had sheltered her.

This action brought her into view of the party below.

Perceiving that they had been spied upon they ran to catch her, and more than one shot at her as she scrambled up the steep.

"That's Topnotch Tim's girl!" shouted Dan Lasher. "Catch her! Run her down! Shoot her! Anything to stop her! She will go straight to the mine if she gets away!"

That was just what Susie Marlow's purpose was, and no little thing was likely to stop her.

She got over the summit of the ridge without being struck or scared, and almost flew across the rough and stony ground as she made her way to her pony, which was still whinnying for her.

To throw the bridle loose and mount was but the work of a second.

The outlaws hastened to climb the slope, reaching the top just in time to see her disappearing from their view.

Shot after shot was fired, though there was not the faintest chance to touch her, and the next moment she was out of sight.

Her pony, understanding at once what she wanted, was only too glad of the chance to put himself to his best speed, and his clattering hoofs fairly made the sparks fly when she got back into the trail, and headed him for the Topnotch Mine.

Dan Lasher and his party, though fully aware of her object, were unable to prevent its accomplishment, as not one of them was mounted.

As it was absolutely certain that she would carry the news of their intention to the mine, their only chance was to hurry on and get there as soon as possible, before her information could be made effective by preparations for the defense of the threatened point.

So they picked up their feet at a lively rate, urged on by Dan Lasher, reached the trail, and started a foot-race in the direction which the girl had taken.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FIGHTING AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

BURCH BLANTON was not having a very pleasant time at the mine, owing to the discontent of the men and the consequent difficulty of managing matters there.

He did not give himself, however, much uneasiness about the affairs of the company, as he had his own opinion of the recent high-handed proceedings of the Tycoons, and his opinion did not differ widely from that which was entertained by the miners.

They knew where his sympathies were, and their friendship made things less uncomfortable for him than they otherwise might have been.

Blanton contented himself, therefore, with overseeing the work at the mine, getting out the ore slowly and without any special effort to increase the output.

He had company there, as Simon Marvel had been sent to the mine by his father, partly to get him out of harm's way, and partly to act as a reporter and watch Blanton as well as the miners.

In that capacity Simon was practically useless, as Burch Blanton had become his closest friend, whom he regarded as little short of perfection.

If he made any reports to the Topnotch authorities, they must have been merely a reflection of the opinions of the engineer.

An occasional visitor to the mine, but a pretty frequent one, was Timothy Marlow, whose regard for Blanton had strengthened with better acquaintance, and from whom the engineer got much useful advice and information, the Mad Parson being nothing like as mad as he was reputed to be.

It was near the hour when the day-shift was to go off and the night-shift was to come on, and Burch Blanton and Simon Marvel were standing near the mouth of the mine, conversing confidentially, when the rapid hoof-beats of a galloping horse were heard coming down the mountain.

"That must be a runaway horse," said Blanton, and he hastily climbed a ridge, followed by Simon.

From that position they saw a woman on a pony coming toward them at the best speed the pony could make.

The ground was rocky and dangerous; but the fearless rider urged the little animal forward as if with utter recklessness, though in reality she was guiding and managing him with consummate skill.

"It is Miss Marlow!" cried Simon in amazement.

"Yes, and her horse is not running away with her, but she is running him for all he is worth. Something must have happened at her home; but she is safe, thank God!"

They ran down to meet her, and she gladly reined in her panting and almost exhausted pony.

Before either of them could assist her to dismount, she alighted and stood before them, looking radiantly beautiful with her face flushed by exercise and excitement.

"What is the matter?" eagerly asked Blanton.

"Is there any trouble at your house?"

"No—the trouble is here. Dan Lasher is coming with a crowd to take the mine."

Briefly she told the story of her spying, and gave a description of the hostile party.

Blanton did not need a moment for reflection, but at once decided what he would do.

It is lucky for us that you have brought the news," he said. "Those men have probably followed you down, and they will be here soon. It would be too dangerous for you to try to go back, and your pony is so badly used up that he can carry you no further. If you will stay with us, I think you will be safe."

"That is what I meant to do," she answered.

"I will stay, and I want you to give me a rifle."

"I don't think we will be so hard pressed as to need your services as a fighter, though you can use a rifle so well. Go into the mine with Mr. Marvel, and I will bring the pony."

The mine was likely to be more hardly pressed, though, than the engineer supposed—at least, the danger was greater than his words implied—and Susie Marlow proved to be very useful to him, not as a fighter, but by the fact of her presence there.

When he explained the situation to the men, and begged them to stand by him and the mine, several of them firmly declared that they would do no fighting for the high-headed Tycoons who controlled the Topnotch Mining Company, and the number of those who wanted to keep out of the fight would have been greater, but for the gallant girl who brought the news.

She must be defended, at all events, and the best of the men rallied around her without the least hesitation.

Others were prompted by pure loyalty to stand by the mine, and in others the instinct of fighting was so strong that they would welcome a lively row, no matter who their adversaries might be.

The rifles were distributed among those who were willing to use them, and preparations for defense were made as speedily as possible, but not a bit too soon, as the approach of the outlaws was reported before the arrangements were complete.

It would have been better for Dan Lasher and his party if they had not got there so soon, as they had traveled so fast in their pursuit of Susie Marlow that they were too tired to go into action at once.

They were absolutely obliged to halt and rest; but their approach had been discovered, and they were not to be allowed to take their ease and arrange the affair to suit themselves.

Burch Blanton, who believed that war was inevitable, thought that it would be best to force the fighting, rather than give them a chance to rest and choose their point of attack.

So he led out a few trusty men to a ridge that overlooked the hollow in which the outlaws had halted, and opened fire upon them.

That set the ball rolling at a fast and furious rate.

Dan Lasher's men, full of wrath at finding themselves assailed when they had expected to be the assailants, started up and rushed for the mine.

The scouting-party retreated in good order to their defenses, and the battle was begun in earnest.

So impetuous was the onset that the defenders of the mine were nearly overwhelmed at the opening of the engagement.

It was the presence and example of Dan Lasher that aroused the enthusiasm of his followers, and filled them with fight.

He proved himself to be a capable commander, skillful as well as courageous, and led his men right on, as if by instinct, against the weakest point of the defenses, going to the front in a gallant style that compelled them to follow him.

The miners rallied to their work splendidly; but their line was broken, and soon they were huddled together in such bad shape that all the advantage was on the side of their adversaries.

Blanton did his best to straighten out matters and form a new line of defense, and was specially anxious to strike down Dan Lasher, who was quite as eager to get at the engineer; but each of them seemed to bear a charmed life just then, and in the press and huddle they could not come together.

Soon the fighting was at such close quarters that the rifles could not be used, and revolvers were brought into play.

It was, in fact, a rough-and-tumble fight, and in the darkness that had settled down, it was difficult to distinguish friends from foes.

Simon Marvel, when his blood was up, fought admirably, and won the respect of the miners as well as the praise of his friend Blanton.

Susie Marlow, who had been placed, before the engagement began, in what was believed to be a safe position, soon emerged from it with a rifle in her hands, and played a man's part in the exciting performance.

Blanton caught sight of her when she had started into the fight, but was not able to prevent her just then, as he had his hands full, and could only hope that she would not get hurt.

It was Simon Marvel who had the luck of coming into collision with Dan Lasher, and it was bad luck for him, too.

A shot from the gambler's pistol stretched him on the ground, and Dan was about to rush forward over the young fellow's body, when he was confronted by Susie Marlow.

The sight of the girl more than astonished him—it seemed to almost paralyze him.

"You here?" he cried. "You here?"

As he halted, powerless to advance or to raise a weapon, the girl, who had exhausted every charge of her magazine rifle, swung it as if to bar his passage or strike him down.

Burch Blanton, perceiving what he believed to be her danger, dashed in between the girl and the gambler.

Dan Lasher, recovering from his astonishment, clinched the engineer in what promised to be a death-grapple.

Instantly the followers of each pressed forward to the help of their leaders, and Susie Marlow would surely have been knocked down and run over in the *melee* had not a new arrival made a sudden change of scene.

The arrival was Timothy Marlow, who burst in upon the combatants unexpectedly, armed only with his long and stout stick.

"The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" he shouted, as he rushed among the outlaws, almost mowing them down with the staff which he wielded with both hands.

It was probably his wild looks and his frantic yells, quite as much as his quick and vigorous aggression, that scared and stupefied them.

They fell back before him like sheep before a blizzard, and for a moment the cracking of the revolvers nearly ceased.

Blanton hastened to take advantage of the diversion in favor of his party, as he and Dan Lasher had been separated without damage to either.

"Pitch in, boys!" he shouted. "Now's your chance! Pitch in and clean them out!"

The miners did pitch in with a will, animated by the example of the Mad Parson, whose appearance might have been taken for a direct interposition of Providence in their behalf.

When they had got their adversaries on the run, the rest was easy.

The outlaws, led in their retreat as in their advance by Dan Lasher, broke and ran, and again the revolvers cracked merrily.

They scattered as they ran, the growing darkness and the broken ground giving them shelter and escape, and the miners were too glad to get rid of them to pursue them far.

Blanton was obliged, however, to chase and stop the Mad Parson, who was absolutely frantic with excitement, as he seemed for a time to regard the entire affair as a plot against his daughter, and wanted to push forward and make an end of the outlaws.

When he had been brought back and controlled, the engineer and his friends were able to "take account of stock," and they were glad to find themselves as well off as they were.

The casualties had been heavy on both sides,

and the outlaws had been so panic-stricken that they had scampered away without carrying off any of their dead and wounded, who had been left to the care of their adversaries.

Simon Marvel, who had been supposed to be dead, was alive and nearly well, Dan Lasher's bullet having stunned him by grazing his skull, but leaving only a scalp wound.

Susie Marlow, unhurt, but pale with excitement, was glad of the chance to soothe and pacify her father, who soon quieted down when he was assured of her safety.

She told him how she had happened to be there, and he praised and blamed her by turns, for her courage and for what he chose to call her recklessness.

Then he started home with her in the night, walking by the side of her pony.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PEACE ON THE PLATEAU.

On the plateau where Timothy Marlow and his daughter had their home it was peaceful and pleasant enough one bright summer afternoon, shortly after the desperate fight at the Topnotch mine.

Whatever difficulties and contentions there might be elsewhere, it looked as if trouble could never invade that lovely spot.

The flowers were blooming abundantly about the house, the vegetables in the kitchen garden were growing luxuriantly, the mare was quietly cropping the grass in her inclosure with the colt frisking at her side, and sweet Susie Marlow was in her favorite seat in front of the cabin, busy with her sewing, and enjoying the balmy air and the beautiful view.

She was alone, too, as it was fully twenty-four hours since her father had been home, and Caesar had gone away to attend to some necessary business.

Consequently she was startled when she heard a tread near by, and saw a man coming toward her from the direction of the Topnotch trail.

The next moment it was clear that there was no occasion for alarm, as the man was surely harmless, at least as far as she was concerned.

She smiled when she became aware of the slight but trim and well-dressed figure of Simon Marvel, who had more of the look of a dandy on dress parade than of a miner or mountaineer.

Such as he was, he was welcome to Susie, who rose and gave him a friendly greeting.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Marvel," she said, "especially as I was beginning to feel really lonesome."

"Lonesome? Is it possible that you are all alone here?" anxiously inquired the young man.

"I was quite alone until you came; but your arrival has made a pleasant difference. Take a seat out here, Mr. Marvel, and tell me all the Topnotch news."

"Thank you. I will light a cigar, if you have no objection."

"Of course I have no objection. I like to see you enjoy yourself."

Simon lighted his cigar, but did not seem to be enjoying himself, or to be in any hurry to talk.

"What is the matter?" asked Susie. "You look thoughtful and troubled."

"I am surprised at finding you here alone, and must confess that I am worried about it. That ought not to be so. It is dangerous."

"I don't fear any danger."

"You may not fear it; but the danger exists. You have had trouble here before now, as I have good reason to know, and you may have trouble again."

"The scoundrels who attacked us then are dead, or the worst of them are."

"But there are plenty of others alive and about. The men who were run out of Topnotch are camped somewhere in the mountains, with more of the same sort, and they are none too good to worry unprotected people."

"I fancy that the knock-down blow they got at the mine has put them out of gear for awhile."

"It won't do to trust too much to that fancy, and you know that they have a grudge against you. Where is your father?"

"He left here yesterday morning."

"Do you mean to say that he has not been here since then? That is bad. I am afraid that he is crazy indeed."

"He is crazy just now. That is why he has gone away."

"He is really crazy? He has gone away in a crazy fit? And you can speak of such a misfortune so calmly? Miss Marlow, you surprise me."

"I am surprised at myself sometimes; but I am used to it, you see. The sufferings that we have learned to bear lose much of their pain. I will tell you a secret, Mr. Marvel, though it is not much of a secret, as I suppose that many people about here understand it. My father is really crazy once every year. The fit strikes him on the anniversary of the loss of his wife, my mother. I need not go into the particulars of that sad event. He lost her under very distressing circumstances, and that is what turned his head. On that anniversary he always goes away, and I neither see nor hear anything of him for three or four days, sometimes longer."

"Do you not know what becomes of him?"

"I never have the faintest idea. I can only guess that he wanders about in the mountains until his mind comes back to him."

"Don't he tell you, when he gets back, what he has been doing?"

"He knows nothing about it. The period of his absence is a blank to him. But I know that he has always been able to take care of himself, and that he has always come home safe and well. That is the only consolation I have. I cannot stop him or restrain him, and can only wait patiently for his return."

"It needs something more than patience, I should say. What has become of your handy man the dwarf?"

"He had to go away this morning, but I expect him back soon. I don't think there is any danger, Mr. Marvel. Tell me the Topnotch news."

"There is nothing new in Topnotch. Business is dull, except with the whisky-shops, which are doing more than they ought to. It has got to be the rowdiest place I ever saw, and I guess that my father and the rest of the Tycoons are beginning to think that their style of running things has been a mistake."

"That is what my father has thought all along. Gambling is a bad thing, of course; but there are other ways of getting rid of bad things short of breaking people's heads. Why, dear me! speaking of heads, Mr. Marvel, you have been here all this time, and I have not thought to ask about your head that was wounded in the fight at the mine. How is your head?"

"My head is all right. How is your heart?"

"My heart? What do you mean? I came out of the fight all safe. I was not wounded in the heart."

"Not then, perhaps; but I thought you might have been touched at some other time, and that it was a tall young fellow who had wounded you."

"What do you mean, Mr. Marvel?"

"Burch Blanton is the tall young fellow I was speaking of."

The girl's vivid blush told that the shot had struck home.

"Seriously, Miss Marlow," said Simon, "are you going to marry Blanton?"

"I believe that he is expecting me to marry him," she meekly answered.

"So it is settled. I thought so. Well, Burch is my best friend, and is a very fine man. I don't know a finer man of his inches, and he has plenty of inches, too. I envy him immensely; but I knew all along that there was no chance for me."

"No chance for you? You puzzle me again. What do you mean, Mr. Marvel?"

"You can guess that easy enough. I mean that I am very fond of you, myself, and have been since I first saw you. I am still fond of you, though I know that you are going to marry Blanton, and always will be, I suppose. You know, Miss Marlow, that a fellow can't help that sort of thing."

"Can't he? I hope he will make the best of it, then. I want you to like me, but am willing to admit to you that I love your friend Blanton, and that he, or nobody, must be my husband."

"That is all right, Miss Marlow. I envy Burch—that's all. I should think it would worry him to know that you are left here alone."

"I suppose it would, if he knew it; but he does not happen to know that I was left alone to-day."

"He does not come here often, then?"

"He was here day before yesterday, the night after the fight, and he is to come here to-night. He can seldom get away from the mine in the daytime, you know."

"I am glad that he is coming to-night, as I want to feel that you are safe."

CHAPTER XXX.

DEATH AND CAPTURE.

SUSIE MARLOW rose hastily, and stood in an attitude of listening.

She did not lay her head to the ground in Caesar's style, as if the vibrations of the earth could give her the information she wanted; but it was plain that her nervous nature was strained intensely in the act of listening.

"There is somebody coming!" she cried eagerly. "Perhaps it is Mr. Blanton—no, it is too early for him. Perhaps it is Caesar. Surely it cannot be father."

Suddenly she started back with a cry of alarm.

"My God! it is neither of them!"

Simon Marvel, who had followed her gaze with his eyes, saw several men who had ascended the plateau and were hurrying toward the house through the trees.

It needed but a glance to assure him that neither Blanton nor Caesar was among them.

The same glance told him who and what they were.

"We are lost!" he exclaimed. "Miss Marlow, those men are Dan Lasher and part of his gang!"

She had seen them plainly enough, and she knew that escape was impossible.

If her father or Blanton or Caesar had been

there, there might have been some hope of resistance; but what could she and Simon Marvel do against those men?

But resistance to the last extremity was what she decided on immediately, and she hastened to take the only course that was left to her.

"Into the house!" she cried. "We can fight them off there, if we can do it at all."

Into the house they went, and the door was closed and barred quickly, and each picked up a rifle and prepared for desperate work.

But they were only two—a young woman who was not supposed to be accustomed to the use of weapons, and a young man who did not pretend to be a fighter.

What could they be expected to do against a dozen strong, well-armed and determined ruffians, led by so resolute and implacable a man as Dan Lasher?

Their only hope was that the cabin might serve as a fortification until they could kill off or drive away their assailants.

In that case, however, it would be necessary that the door should oppose a firm resistance to the assault, and for that resistance the raiders had come prepared.

They had picked up the trunk of a young tree as they came along, and that was to open the way for them.

As soon as they saw Susie Marlow and Simon Marvel run into the house, they hurried forward, with the view of giving them as little time as possible for preparation.

As they wheeled around in front of the cabin, a couple of shots were fired from the window, and one of the assailants tumbled over.

This would never do, and steps were at once taken to put a stop to it, as Dan Lasher had men enough for all the purposes of his expedition.

More than half of them, in obedience to his orders, leveled their rifles and opened fire on the window and every other part of the building where a bullet could possibly penetrate the interior.

This fire was so rapid and heavy and effective, that the two forlorn defenders of the cabin could not even think of endeavoring to answer it, but crouched below the flying missiles, expecting momentarily a struggle that could only end in one way.

In the mean time the men who carried the log did not lose a minute.

They rushed at the door, and the first blow of the battering-ram shattered it and made the whole cabin shiver.

The second blow burst the fastenings of the door, and drove it inward, where it fell with a crash among the furniture.

Susie Marlow and Simon Marvel, who had expected this event, started up instantly, and fired desperately and effectively at the rush of the raiders; but they were as straws in a whirlwind, and were immediately overwhelmed.

Savagely they were seized, their rifles were taken from them, and they were dragged outside into the presence of Dan Lasher and his ruffianly gang.

Handsome Dan looked at them with a cruel expression of malignant satisfaction.

"You have been acting like a pair of fools," he said, fiercely. "You know well enough that you had no chance to escape us or to fight us; yet you have tried to do it, like a brace of condemned idiots, and have done harm that you will have to pay for. Do you know that you have killed one man, and badly hurt two more? Don't you suppose that you have got to suffer for that?"

Neither Susan nor Simon made any answer, but looked straight at him, expecting the worst, and fearing it not.

Dan Lasher, by the way, did not at that time deserve his name of Handsome Dan.

As has been said, he had outgrown it, and the artificial aids of civilization had been called in to repair the ravages of time; but, since he had been driven away from Topnotch, and had taken refuge in the hills, he was without those aids, and had been compelled to lead a rougher existence than was agreeable to him.

Consequently his hair and mustache showed the lack of their accustomed dye, and in his face were the evidences of years and a hard life.

"So you won't talk," he said, with a sneer. "Very well; I reckon I can do the talking for the family, and I see before me the very ones I have been wanting to get hold of. I have caught them both together, and have killed two fine birds with one stone. Here is the young Tycoon, son of the man who broke me up in business, and drove me into the woods. I came near hanging you once, young chap, and missed it by a scratch. Do you think I am likely to miss it again?"

"I was not afraid of you then," stoutly answered Simon, "and I am not afraid of you now. You may do your worst, and may be sure that you will pay for it some time. But you surely can have no grudge against this young lady, who had the right to defend her home."

The gambler approached Susie Marlow, and the expression of his face was more malevolent than ever.

"No grudge against her?" he said, with a bitter sneer. "Well, perhaps no, and perhaps yes. Suppose she might help me to work out a grudge against somebody else? I've been wanting her, and now I've got her, and I mean to keep her. You are prettier, too, my girl, than I had expected to find you, and that is no small thing to say. Better looking than your mother was, I do believe."

Susan shuddered as she looked at him, and a new terror drove the blood from her face; yet she stood up boldly, and spoke firmly.

"What do you know about my mother?" she demanded.

"What do I know about her?" chuckled the gambler. "Well, my dear, what I don't know about her would scarcely be worth finding out. You are her living image, except that you are prettier, and I am glad that I have found you. I don't doubt that we will get on together, and you may give me a kiss to begin with."

He advanced toward her, and was about to take the girl's face between his two hands, when Susan struck him with her open hand a blow that made his cheeks tingle.

"Curse you for a spitfire!" he angrily exclaimed, as he raised his clinched fist.

Simon Marvel, who had with difficulty restrained his indignation thus far, could hold in his temper no longer.

Jerking himself loose from the man who carelessly held him, he drew a revolver which had not been discovered on his person, and fired at the insolent gambler.

The hasty shot, unfortunately, was not well aimed.

The bullet struck Dan Lasher's shoulder, and the only effect was to make him jump and swear.

Before Simon could pull trigger again, he was shot down by one of Lasher's friends—shot right through the heart, and he never knew what hurt him.

Susie Marlow burst into tears when her rash but faithful friend fell dead before her eyes.

"It was a pity to waste him like that," said Handsome Dan. "I had another use for the young fool, and it would have paid me better to keep him alive a while longer. He ought to have had better sense. Now, boys, if there is anything here that you want, hurry up and get it, as we must be off."

The "boys" eagerly availed themselves of their leader's permission, and hastened to pillage the house.

Scarcely anything of value was left when they were through with it, and all but Dan Lasher were loaded with miscellaneous plunder.

The dead man was left there with Simon Marvel's body, and the wounded had to go on after a fashion, without much help from their comrades.

As for Handsome Dan, he was employed in securing and leading away Susie Marlow, whom he gave to understand that she was his prisoner, and that thenceforward she would belong to him.

She clinched her teeth and said nothing, strengthening herself for endurance, and so she left the plateau with her captors.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PARSON AND THE DWARF.

THE sun set splendidly, bathing the plateau in a golden glory.

All was peace and quiet then, as no living person was there by whom or about whom any disturbance could be raised.

The shattered door and the dismantled cabin told of riot and rapine, and no words were needed to corroborate the testimony of those mute witnesses.

Other mute witnesses were outside—the ruffian who had been shot from the house, and the brave but unlucky Simon Marvel.

The outlaw lay partly under the battering-log near the cabin-door, but Simon had fallen into one of Susie Marlow's flower-beds, and his pale face was surrounded and beautified by bright blooms.

The mare and her colt came to the edge of their inclosure, and looked over the fence as if they had some comprehension of the calamity. They actually seemed to shudder at the sight of the motionless men on the ground, and both "nickered" plaintively as they turned away, but they did not lose their appetite for grass.

After the sunset and the twilight, darkness settled down upon the hills and the valleys, covering the peaceful plateau and the quiet dead.

Then a tall man, with a long staff in his hand, came up from the trail and hastened toward the cabin.

It was Timothy Marlow, the Mad Parson, the father of the girl who had been captured and carried away.

He never came home without a certain feeling of uneasiness, and on this occasion, owing to his peculiar mental condition, the feeling was intensified.

But, was not Caesar at home, and was not his daughter therefore safe?

He had gone away, as Susie informed Simon Marvel, on the anniversary of the loss of his wife, and nobody knew what had become of

him; but this time he had returned somewhat earlier than usual.

Not that he was yet entirely in his right mind, or that he had any clear perception of what he ought or ought not to do; but something that he could not explain had sent him home.

His uneasiness evidently increased when he came in sight of the house and saw no light there.

Susie always had a light burning for him when he was away after dark; but there was no light then, nor was there any sign of life on the plateau.

After pausing for a moment, and pressing his forehead with his two hands, as if to collect his scattered senses, he hastened toward the house.

Before he came in sight of the shattered door he stumbled against something that was neither a log nor a stone—something that had a queer feeling which sent a shiver through him.

Dropping to the ground he felt of it, and discovered that it was a corpse, as it was surely a man who was cold and did not stir, and who was clearly incapable of motion.

The Mad Parson struck a match and held it to the face of the corpse, recognizing at once the features of Simon Marvel.

With an exclamation of horror and fear he arose suddenly and started toward the dark and desolate house.

Hardly had he taken half a dozen steps, when he stumbled against the battering log, and at the same time discovered another corpse.

Pausing only to satisfy himself that it was the body of a man, he arose again, and then the nature and extent of the calamity began to dawn upon him.

The fallen log, the shattered door, the two corpses outside, told a terrible story, and yet they did not tell all that he wanted to know.

What had become of his child? Had she been killed, or—perhaps worse—had she been carried away?

What scoundrels had been guilty of this outrage?

The old man entered the cabin, struck a match, and looked around.

Nothing was to be seen there but ruin and desolation. There was not even a lamp that he could light. Nearly everything that had not been carried away was destroyed.

Susan was surely not there, and Caesar was not there.

What had become of the dwarf? Had he, also, been captured and carried away by the unknown marauders?

No—if he had been there, he would have perished in defense of her whom he worshiped with an almost slavish adoration. Nothing was more certain than that Caesar would never have been taken alive.

Therefore the marauders must have come and done their dastardly work when he was absent. But why had he not returned? What had become of him?

Unable to straighten these matters out in his perplexed and bewildered brain, the Mad Parson picked up a blanket, carried it out, and wrapped it around the corpse of Simon Marvel, as if for the purpose of protecting it from any further harm.

Then he returned into the house, struck some more matches, got a rifle that had been overlooked by the raiders, found some ammunition, and started out to search for his daughter, but without the faintest idea of what direction he should take, or what he should do.

He pressed his hands to his forehead again, in an effort to recall his still scattered senses, and then descended the plateau, to attempt the impossible task of finding a trail in the darkness.

Again he was as he had been when he left his home two days previously—his mind astray, his wits wool-gathering, and apparently incapable of rendering any service to his daughter or anybody else.

What, then, had become of Caesar, the brave and faithful Caesar, who would never have left his mistress in the lurch if he had known her danger and had been able to help her?

In the deep and narrow gulch into which the Topnotch toughs had vainly endeavored to follow Timothy Marlow, a man was working, about the middle of the afternoon, in a rather peculiar fashion.

The worker was a dwarf, and that dwarf was unquestionably Caesar; but, what was he doing?

In a niche or recess at the side of the gulch, which was not deep enough to be called a cavern, he was picking away at a yellow quartz vein of rock with a hammer and a cold chisel, and was striking off from the vein, or digging out of it, lumps and splinters of a metal much yellower than the quartz that inclosed or held it.

As he chipped off the bits of this yellow metal, he picked them up carefully, and deposited them in a canvas bag, which was then about half filled.

They were precisely similar, with the exception of a little miner's manipulation, to the nuggets and splinters which Timothy Marlow had

been in the habit of disposing of at Topnotch and Tolbert, and which had made people wonder where his bonanza could be.

The bonanza was right there, in a gulch so narrow and deep that the sun's rays scarcely penetrated it except at high noon.

It was so well hidden that it was sure to escape observation except in the event of a very close and careful search, and yet it was a veritable bonanza, the gold-bearing quartz being so rich that the precious metal cropped out and could be chipped off with a cold chisel, as Caesar was chipping it then.

In fact, the lode had never been worked in any other way, though it promised to yield an abundant harvest of wealth under regular mining operations, if any such should ever be undertaken.

As the dwarf carefully deposited the yellow bits in his canvas bag, he chuckled and laughed, and seemed to be talking merrily to himself, though of course he uttered nothing that could be understood.

The truth was that Caesar had discovered that there was a temporary scarcity of money at the home on the plateau, and the fact was firmly impressed upon his mind that there was no living without money.

The Mad Parson having been afflicted with one of his annual disappearances, Caesar naturally supposed that it devolved upon him to furnish the family supplies, and he knew where and how to get the values which might procure everything that was wanted.

So he had easily gained permission from Susie to take the hammer and the cold chisel and the canvas bag, and make a draft on the rich bank in the gulch.

He had already secured enough value to last the family on the plateau a long time; but the work pleased him, and down there out of sight of the sun it was not easy to note the passage of the hours.

So he kept on, working busily, and chuckling and laughing and talking to himself, as was his fashion.

Time passed, and the day was nearly done, when he began to seem to comprehend the flight of time and to realize the fact that he ought to go home.

Then he secured the canvas bag upon his body, buckling it under his coat, put the cold-chisel in a pocket, took the hammer in his right hand, and started on his return to the plateau and Susie, chuckling and laughing at his success in getting gold for the use of herself and her father.

Hardly had he stepped out of the recess in which Topnotch Tim's bank was located, when he heard something that startled him.

That is to say, he heard it in his peculiar manner, every noise or movement in his vicinity being conveyed to him through the muscles and nerves of his body, which largely made up, if not fully, for his loss of the sense of hearing.

Instantly the dwarf threw himself down, with his ear to the ground, as if he could really hear, and for several minutes he lay there and seemingly listened.

When he arose, there was no more chuckling and laughing, but his face had assumed a very serious look, and he pressed both his hands to his forehead, as if something had happened to daze and bewilder him.

Then he moved up the gulch, slowly, cautiously, and evidently with a desire that his presence there should not be suspected by any person who might possibly be about.

Keeping close to the southern wall of the gulch, he not only did not desert the shadows of that side, but also used for concealment every rock, boulder, or clump of bushes that came in his way, covering himself all the while as carefully and completely as any hunted "varmint" might have done.

Twice in the course of his concealed and tortuous passage he dropped to the ground as he had done before, laid his ear to the earth, and listened with his muscles and nerves.

Working his way in this fashion, he finally, as darkness was coming on, arrived near the pass by which Topnotch Tim and himself usually entered the gulch.

It was not really what might be called a pass, being merely a break or gap in the rocky formation, from which a steep and rather dangerous path led downward.

The gap was difficult of discovery, and Caesar had supposed that it was known to nobody but the Mad Parson and himself.

Yet there he saw, emerging from the gap, and starting down the steep and difficult path, not only several men, but something more.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DWARF'S DOOM.

CATCHING sight of that procession, Caesar suddenly sunk down behind a rock, and waited to see all that there was to be seen.

Darkness was coming on, as has been said, and in that deep and narrow gulch darkness came quicker than elsewhere; but the dwarf's eyes, possibly to make up for the lack of his other senses, were preternaturally keen.

Through a rift in the fallen masses of rock that sheltered him, he could easily see, in spite

of the growing darkness, the procession that started from the gap and began to defile down the descent, and he used his eyes for all they were worth.

This is what his eyes told him, aided by the muscles and nerves which had their own way of imparting information to him:

Out of the gap came, perhaps, ten men, though Caesar was so excited at the moment that he did not attempt to count them, and had but an indefinite idea of their number.

First of the procession was a man whom the dwarf knew well, as he had visited Topnotch during the recent excitement there, and that man had been pointed out to him in a way to cause him to be remembered.

The man was Dan Lasher—Handsome Dan, though his beauty was sadly worn and faded just then—and he held by the arm, evidently with a grip that was not intended to let go easily, a young woman.

The young woman was Susie Marlow.

As Caesar caught sight of her, he gave a great gasp, and his weazened face turned as red as fire, and he shivered as if a chill had struck him, and he half raised himself, but then sunk down again, mumbling what, if they were articulated, might have been curses.

The dusk could not interfere with his vision, as his eyes could see in the dark like those of a cat or any other wild animal.

He saw that Susan Marlow was not only gripped by the arm by the gambler, but was also secured by a rope or cord, which was fastened about her waist, and held by one of the men who followed her.

As Caesar saw that, he gritted his teeth, and the blood rushed through his veins, and his muscles swelled.

Her face was pale and set, making her look years beyond her age; but it could be seen that she was fearless and ready to take advantage of any chances of escape that might offer.

As Caesar caught sight of that sad spectacle, he crouched down behind his rocky shelter, as if to restrain himself from rushing forth to her rescue, and groaned and writhed in the intensity of his passionate agony.

He reached around to his hip-pocket and drew out a revolver, which he examined greedily, but not hopefully.

It was only a five-shooter, and Susie's captors were double the number of its loaded chambers.

Some of those men, as well as their leader, he knew by sight, if not by name, and he knew them for daring and desperate rascals, who were quick on the trigger, and before whose deadly aim he could not expect to stand for a moment.

If he should open fire upon them, he would surely be dead before he could shoot twice, and that was not the way to help the young lady whom he idolized.

If he was to help her at all, his only hope would be to follow her captors and watch and wait for his chances.

So he halted behind his barrier of rock, gritting his teeth, and grunting and growling like a wild beast.

Dan Lasher descended the steep and difficult path slowly and carefully, never relaxing his grip of Susie Marlow's arm, and the rope around her waist was firmly held by a stalwart and sure-footed man above.

Thus they reached the base of the declivity, where they halted a few moments, and then went southward up the gulch, Handsome Dan in the lead with his prisoner, and the others bringing up the rear so solidly and formidably that an attack upon them by one man would have been too foolhardy a thing to even think of.

As they passed up the gulch, Caesar emerged from his shelter, and followed them cautiously and silently, creeping along the side of the rocky wall, and covering himself behind the rocks and boulders and clumps of shrubs and stunted trees that intervened between him and the party he was pursuing.

This excessive caution did not appear to be necessary, as darkness had then settled down in the gulch, though there was still plenty of daylight out on the hills.

Silence was proper enough, considering the style of men the dwarf was pursuing, but concealment was not required.

Yet Caesar kept himself concealed, much as a panther might have done when following its expected prey, but was no less swift and certain in his pursuit than the panther would have been.

Dan Lasher and his comrades knew where they were going, and knew just how to reach their destination.

Therefore they tramped sturdily and steadily up the gulch, turning neither to the right nor to the left.

They could not have turned aside if they had wished to, as the sides of the gulch were impassable, and there was no exit—nothing to do but to go straight ahead until the gulch should terminate or open out somewhere.

So they trudged on, until the darkness grew to be as thick and black as if it had been boiled down.

Still they trudged on, occasionally stumbling

into the brook that ran down the middle of the gulch, and frequently barking their shins against the broken rock and boulders that blocked the way, all of which involved a display of vociferous language that would not have been tolerated in a Sunday school.

And still they trudged on, their course continually leading upward, until the sides of the gulch gradually lowered, and finally it opened into the tangle of hills that formed the upper portion of the Topnotch mountain range.

Cæsar had never before followed the gulch so far, and he did not know where he was; but he pressed forward on the trail of Susie's captors, keeping as close to them as he dared.

His wish was, if possible, to give her some shadow of comfort by informing her of his presence, and then to watch for a chance to rescue her from the scoundrels who had possession of her.

When Dan Lasher and his band had fairly got out of the gulch, they halted for rest and refreshment, the refreshment being of the liquid kind and carried in flasks that were passed about freely.

As the drinkers became hilarious, Cæsar crept closer to them, and nearly forgot his caution in his eager desire to attack them then and there.

If he had possessed two revolvers, he would probably have opened fire upon them; but, when his five shots were exhausted, if not sooner, he would surely be at their mercy, without accomplishing anything for Susie.

The senses of one of the men were acute enough, notwithstanding the liquor he had drunk, to cause him to suspect that some strange or unfriendly presence was near, and he pricked up his ears as a wolf might have done.

Suddenly he jerked out a revolver, and fired in the direction of the presence he suspected.

The bullet whizzed close to Cæsar's head, and the dwarf crouched down, so quiet thereafter that he could not have heard himself breathe.

"What do you mean, Larry?" sharply demanded Dan Lasher. "What did you fire at?"

"Seemed to me that I heard or smelt some kind of a varmint over thar."

"I reckon, Larry, it was whisky that was doing your hearing and smelling just then."

"Mebbe it was; but I ain't in the way of missin' many chances."

"Well, don't give us any more such foolishness, or you may have trouble with me. Come, boys; we are wasting time here."

Susan Marlow had remained seated during this halt, her face pale, but watchful and determined.

She neither spoke nor moved, and by no sign did she show that she was aware of Dan Lasher's glittering and gloating gaze.

When the party set forward again, she arose and accompanied her captors quietly, without a murmur.

Cæsar also started up and followed them.

It was still dark, but soon there were signs of the coming dawn, and within an hour day began to break.

The man called Larry, who had not profited by Dan Lasher's reproof, still kept his nose and ears actively employed, with special attention to the rear, suspecting that there was something to be "heard or smelt" there.

After awhile he fell back behind his comrades, but so quietly that they did not notice his desertion, and it was not likely to be perceived by the eager dwarf who was pursuing the party so closely.

Then, as the day dawned, Dan Lasher and his men were startled by the sound of a struggle in their rear—a short and sharp struggle, with quick but few cries.

A pistol-shot ended it, and Larry sauntered back to the band.

"So you have been doing it again. What do you mean by that sort of thing?" sharply demanded Dan Lasher.

"I mean that I've got my work in and made it pay," coolly answered Larry. "I was sure that a spy was follerin' us, and I caught him and killed him."

"Did you know the man? Who was he?"

"Topnotch Tim's dwarf feller. A tough subject to handle, too; but I settled him."

Susan Marlow shuddered, and a pain gathered about her heart; but she checked her tears, and it might be supposed that she had not heard the short and sad story of the death of her faithful friend.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MAD PARSON'S QUEST.

It has been said that Timothy Marlow's mind was all astray when he started out to attempt the impossible task of finding a trail in the night.

His wits were wildly wool-gathering, and he was then indeed "The Mad Parson."

There was some method in his madness; but it was an inadequate and useless method.

It would have been impossible for him in his best condition to pick up that trail, especially as it followed the main trail for some distance, and he could not have begun to determine where it emerged from that.

Besides, the outlaws, that they might the better cover their tracks, had gone over into the gulch that held the old man's bonanza.

Of course he did not know that, and he pressed forward blindly, having a vague idea of who the men were who had killed young Marvel and carried off his child, and of where those men might be found, but without possessing wit enough to take the nearest route to their usual haunt.

If he had been able to follow them and overtake them, what could one crazy old man do against so many well-armed and desperate toughs?

Necessarily he had nothing like a clear and definite idea of what he intended to do, except that he must follow the raiders, and find his child.

If he had been in his normal, or even his half-normal condition, Susie would have confided in him thoroughly, and would have implicitly believed in his power to rescue her from any number of enemies, under any possible circumstances.

But she knew that he had gone off in an utterly irresponsible condition; that he was on one of his "annuals," that he was a crazy man when he left his home, and that it might be several days before he would return, as the Scripture says, "clothed, and in his right mind."

Consequently she could not depend on her father for aid in her present extremity, and had no thought of depending on him.

The only person to whom she could look for any help was Cæsar, the dwarf, and she had learned that the poor fellow had been ruthlessly slain while he was endeavoring to aid her.

Perhaps there was one other person—he who had declared himself her lover—from whom she might hope something; but it was surely a wish rather than a hope.

How was he likely to learn what had really happened to her? And what could he be expected to do, in his ignorance of the facts?

In the mean time Timothy Marlow blindly and vaguely pursued his search in the darkness of the night.

The method of his madness showed itself in the persistency with which he sought to find the trail.

It was not by the sense of sight that he pursued his search, but by those of feeling and smelling, groping and sniffing about, as Cæsar or a wild beast might have done.

All the time he gripped tightly the rifle which he had taken from the desolate cabin, but without sense enough to load it, though he had plenty of ammunition for the purpose.

The empty rifle did not help the old man to find the trail, and finally he abandoned the attempt to discover it.

After that he wandered on more blindly than ever, and apparently with less definiteness of purpose.

Again and again he pressed his hands to his head, and now and then he would seat himself on a rock or a log, looking for a time as if he had forgotten his child and everything else that the world contained.

Then he would rise and struggle forward through the intense darkness, keeping no steady or certain direction, but wavering and meandering, as if he did not know whither he was going, or what he wanted to do.

What hope could there be for Susie in a man so helplessly demented?

How could he ever find her, and how could he help her if he should happen to find her?

His route, if it could be called a route, finally brought him to the head of the gulch through which Dan Lasher's band had passed with their captive.

The point he reached might have been easily gained by him much sooner, if he had been in possession of his senses.

Indeed, if he had gone thither directly, without stopping or wandering from the true course, he might have reached the head of the gulch before the outlaws emerged from it, as they, in their wish to cover their tracks, had "gone around Robin Hood's barn" to get home.

As it was, he was about an hour behind them, and it was broad daylight when he reached the place where the gulch opened out into the higher ground of the mountain.

Daylight seemed to make no difference to the Mad Parson.

He staggered or wandered on as blindly and uncertainly as he had during the darkest part of the night.

Suddenly he stumbled over something that he might easily have seen if his eyes had been attending to their duty.

It was just such an object as he had stumbled over before he entered his desolated home on the plateau, and he would have been even more demented than he was, if he had not at once recognized the unmistakable feel of a corpse.

He looked at it, as he was close to it on the ground, and perceived that it was Cæsar, the dwarf, who lay dead there.

This revelation, so sudden and so startling, quickly made a decided change in Topnotch Tim.

Though his mind did not at once become clear, his wits were greatly revived and strengthened,

and he had a much better apprehension of his surroundings and of the meaning of things.

It was evident that Cæsar had been shot to death, and that told the story clearly enough for the old man to understand it.

The dwarf had of course been killed by the scoundrels who ravaged the home on the plateau and carried off Susie Marlow, and he must have been following them with the view of helping her or keeping track of her, when he met his death at their hands.

Therefore the Mad Parson knew that he was on the right track, and, his mind having cleared considerably, he also knew where he was and whither he had intended to go.

His destination, as he had vaguely figured it before he left the plateau, was the outlaw settlement where Dan Lasher had taken refuge.

In the clearing up of things that followed the discovery of Cæsar's body, and considering the place where the body was found, in a direct line from the Marlow house to the haunt of the outlaws, it was plainly impressed upon that old man that he knew just where his daughter was to be found.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

END OF THE QUEST.

It would never do to leave Cæsar's body there to be devoured by foul beasts or birds, and Topnotch Tim, though he then had a definite purpose, and was in a hurry to execute it, did not hesitate to stop and care for the remains of his faithful friend and servant.

This he did by covering the body with stones until there was a sufficient pile to secure it from desecration.

Before he began this above-ground burial, he tenderly and reverently searched the corpse, a proceeding which the outlaws had omitted as something not worth their while.

He found the bag of valuable chippings which the dwarf had brought away from the bonanza in the gulch, and secured it upon his own person, being fully aware of its nature and value.

Having rendered the last service to Cæsar's remains, he pushed forward resolutely, knowing well that he was near his destination.

And so he was, as half an hour's rapid travel brought him to the outlaws' settlement.

It was located in a hollow in the hills, a sort of basin which would have been a lovely place if it had been decently inhabited; but foul birds have foul ways, and those which had nested in that basin were not calculated to make a paradise of the locality.

The sunlight that beat down upon the place showed a few rude cabins, such as miners build in lonely places, and there was no sign of cultivation, of horseflesh, or of any valuable property.

Timothy Marlow stood for a while behind a point of rock, which sheltered him from the possible view of any persons below, and looked down upon the scene.

Though he could not yet be said to be fully "clothed and in his right mind," his senses had to a considerable extent returned to him, and he knew pretty well what he was about.

As a drunken man may be sobered by a sudden shock, so the Mad Parson had been, it may be said, called back to life by his unexpected discovery of Cæsar's dead body.

He was still somewhat dazed, but was slowly pulling himself together as he stood behind the point of rock and looked down into the basin.

Some of the outlaws were strolling about there, engaged in no special occupation, but mostly smoking and loafing.

Timothy Marlow wondered which of them it was who had killed poor Cæsar, wishing that he might single out that one and make an end of him, whatever should happen to the others or to himself.

Susan was not visible anywhere, and it was not to be expected that she would be, as she was probably a prisoner in one of the rude cabins.

The Mad Parson gripped his rifle as he gazed at the idle outlaws; but he had not yet become aroused to the fact that his weapon was comparatively harmless, as he had not thought to load it.

What chance could there be for one old man with an empty rifle against so many stalwart fellows who were thoroughly armed?

Simply no chance at all.

The daylight was against him, too. In the darkness he might have crept about the cabins, and might possibly have found an opportunity to strike an effective blow; but in the broad daylight he was liable to be discovered at every movement he made.

Yet something must be done, and he was fully determined to do something, in spite of all odds and disadvantages.

What he had to do was to attempt in the daylight a task that might be safely accomplished only in the darkness; but his mind was not yet clear enough to enable him to fully appreciate the danger of the undertaking.

Holding the empty rifle in his left hand, he dropped upon the ground, and began to work his way down the slope toward the basin.

The slope, however, was a pretty steep declivity, and was mostly covered with broken stone.

There was no shelter, except a few shrubs and an occasional jutting rock, and the broken stone was loose and liable to be dislodged and to roll down at the steep places with a noise that would inevitably attract the attention of the outlaws.

Such was the task that Timothy Marlow was to undertake, and he would not have had sense enough to shrink from it, even if he had been less determined than he was to get down into the basin.

He sallied forth from behind the rock, stretched himself on the ground, and began to crawl down the slope.

It was literally a crawl, and not even a creep—the crawl of a snake or a worm—as he was compelled to lie flat where there was no sort of shelter to shield him from view, and he was also compelled to move with the utmost care, lest he should dislodge a stone and give warning of his approach.

In spite of his care, he did dislodge a pretty big stone, which went rattling down the slope, and immediately attracted the attention of two of the outlaws, who turned quickly, and looked in the direction from which the sound had come.

Fortunately, the Mad Parson had just then reached a clump of bushes, behind which he squeezed himself into as small a compass as possible.

The outlaws saw nothing to account for the falling of the stone, which was by no means an unusual incident, and they turned away and resumed their smoking and loafing.

More careful than before, if possible, was Timothy Marlow when he again began to crawl down the slope.

The rifle was in his way; but he managed it as well as he could; though, if he had known how useless it was, he would probably have dropped it in disgust.

He at last reached the basin without any further accident, and there new difficulties and perils confronted him.

There was an open space between him and the cabins, and, if he could get to them safely, it was hard to tell what would happen then, as it was only certain that he would be in continual danger of discovery.

Keeping the nearest cabin between him and the men who were loitering about, he made a quiet but quick rush, and succeeded in reaching it safely.

Not daring to circle around it, or to show himself at either of the ends, he tried to peer through the chinks of the logs at the rear, and listened intently and patiently, but neither saw nor heard anything to reward his efforts.

Satisfied that he could learn nothing there, he watched his chance, and succeeded in gaining the rear of another cabin.

There he looked and listened, until he heard a slight sound of movement inside, and fancied that it was accompanied by the rustling of a woman's dress.

If there was a woman there, it must be Susan Marlow, and the old man believed that he had followed the right trail and come to the right spot.

This discovery excited him to such an extent that he had to sink upon the ground and press his hands to his head, that he might allay the fever in his blood and settle his brain for future action.

He was aroused from the partial stupor into which he had fallen by the cracking of a twig near by.

Rising suddenly to his feet, he found himself face to face with Dan Lasher.

There could scarcely be a doubt that the gambler was at the head of the gang which had carried off Susan Marlow, and the Mad Parson's blood boiled at the sight of him.

On the gambler's face was a look between a sneer and a smile, that was very exasperating.

"Where is my child?" fiercely demanded Timothy Marlow. "What have you done with my daughter, you scoundrel?"

"She is here," quietly answered the gambler, with a sneer that could not then be mistaken for a smile. "She is here, and is safe and sound, so far. I have got her, and I mean to keep her."

This atrocious statement, and the tone in which it was uttered, drove the Mad Parson frantic.

His caution disappeared, the sense that had lately returned to him suddenly deserted him, and he was again "as mad as a March hare."

He quickly leveled his rifle at the gambler and pulled the trigger; but it snapped harmlessly.

Dan Lasher laughed aloud, and blew a whistle that hung from his neck.

The old man raised the rifle by the muzzle, and was about to use it as a club, when he was seized from behind by two strong men, and was immediately overpowered.

"Tie him!" ordered the gambler, and Timothy Marlow was helpless in the hands of his daughter's captors.

CHAPTER XXXV. THE GAMBLER'S STORY.

THE Mad Parson's spirit was completely broken when he found himself bound and helpless.

He bowed his head, and the tears fell from his eyes, and he suffered himself to be led away without the slightest protest or attempt at resistance.

He was taken into one of the cabins—not the one at which he was captured—and was given a seat there.

"I reckon you must be tired," observed Dan Lasher, "after your long tramp and your hard job of playing snake, and you will need rest. There is a heap more before you, too."

The exasperating sneer that accompanied the remark had no effect upon the old man this time.

The little cabin room was nearly bare of furniture, and the stuff that was there could hardly be called furniture, it was so rude and wretched.

A seat was there, however, for Timothy Marlow, and it was placed in a corner where he could be well propped up, as he seemed to be scarcely able to hold himself upright.

He did not look then like the tall and athletic individual who was known in those hills as Topnotch Tim, nor did he have the force and fire that people always associated with the Mad Parson; but looked like a poor, weak, broken-down old man, who had nothing to live for, and but little life remaining in him.

After Dan Lasher had left him, he continued to maintain the same demeanor and to present the same broken-down appearance, though his mind and body were both really stronger just then than they had been for several days.

His second shock—that of his capture—had sobered and steadied him again, and he clearly perceived that he had foolishly and uselessly thrown himself into the hands of the scoundrel, who had carried off his daughter.

Both he and she were in a bad scrape, and he had surely made a botch of his attempt to aid her; but there is always hope while there is life, and he was still determined, in spite of the odds against him, to use his utmost efforts for his own deliverance and his daughter's.

Therefore it was that he kept up the weak, listless, and broken-down style that had struck in on him when he was seized and bound by the outlaws.

His hope was that they, perceiving his demoralized condition, would guard him carelessly, and that he might, by watching his chances, be able to free himself and help Susie.

When he had full possession of his senses, he had good reason to believe that he was equal to almost any emergency, and, as he was utterly fearless, the present disaster could not crush his hopes.

He was guarded, however, by two of the outlaws, who remained in the room with him, and who were both well armed, while he was weaponless and bound.

After a while food was brought in to him, which might have been breakfast or dinner, and in quality and quantity it was sufficient for either, and the Mad Parson, whose hands were loosed for the purpose, enjoyed it and satisfied his hunger.

It might have seemed strange to his guards that such a broken and infirm old man should have such an excellent appetite; but they were accustomed to seeing hungry people eat largely, and their wonder was not excited.

After the meal his hands were tied again, and he was left alone until evening, when a good supper was brought in to him, and the same process was repeated.

He noticed that this time his hands were tied loosely and carelessly, the guard who did the job being then considerably inebriated, and it occurred to him that he might manage the cord so that he would be able to free himself if he chose to do so.

With his long and supple fingers he could touch the knot, and he contrived to loosen it so that he could easily pull his hands out.

Then he waited and watched for chances.

His guards overlooked him too closely to give him the least opportunity for escape, until Dan Lasher came in and ordered the two men to follow him with the prisoner.

Timothy Marlow was led to the cabin where he had been captured, and where he had fancied that he heard the rustle of a woman's dress.

It was quite dark when he entered the cabin; but an oil-lamp, which was nothing but a lighted wick floating in a pot of grease, gave light enough to enable him to see his daughter seated in a corner of the room, and to perceive that she was sad, but defiant and determined.

Susan recognized her father at once, and arose and started toward him with an exclamation in which joy and sorrow were mingled; but Dan Lasher turned upon her fiercely, and she shrunk back into her place.

The gambler directed the guards to go out, and they went, leaving him alone in the cabin with his two prisoners.

Surely there could be no danger for him in that, as one was a woman, and the other was an old man, bound and helpless, and both were unarmed.

He seated himself where he had a good view of both—the Mad Parson in one corner of the little room, and his daughter in another—and looked at them with a smile of satisfaction that might easily have been mistaken for a sneer.

"You perceive, Mr. Timothy Marlow," said he, "as I told you, that I have got your daughter here, safe and sound. She is mine, and I mean to keep her. Perhaps I will marry her, and perhaps, to put it mildly, I will do the other thing."

"You villain!" cried the old man; but Susie's warning finger quieted him.

"Go on, if you want to. Hard words break no bones. They may please you, and can't hurt me. As I said, it is all in the perhaps. It will depend on how she behaves. Just now I am inclined to treat her well, if she don't cut up rusty. I suppose you would like to know why I am such a villain, as you call me, though I am no villain, Timothy Marlow—only a man who is going to get even."

"To get even? What do you mean by that?" demanded the old man.

"Is it possible, Timothy Marlow, that you don't know me? Have you never looked at me closely?"

A gleam of intelligence shot from the old man's eyes, but it was not sufficient to betray the knowledge suggested.

"Well, that beats me," said the gambler. "I would never have supposed that you were so stupid. I was almost sure that you would know me the night you came into my place, when you came to pray, and remained to play, and beat my bank so badly."

"Who are you then?" muttered the old man.

"Timothy Marlow, when you were preaching the Gospel at Anoka, you knew a nice young man there named Harvey Varick."

The gleam that shot from the old man's eye then was that of complete intelligence; but it died out instantly, and he listened in the dazed and feeble way that had lately stuck to him.

"Yes, Timothy Marlow, you knew that young man then, and you did him a deadly wrong."

"I did right; I did my duty."

"So you thought, I suppose, in your bigoted, hard-headed way; but it was a deadly wrong to him. I was Harvey Varick, though I have changed so much since then that you did not know me when you saw me in Topnotch. I was in love with a girl in that town, who was of a very good family, and belonged to your church. I loved her with an intense and passionate love, such as I could never give to any other woman. It seemed to me then that without her my life would be worthless, and without her it has been broken and ruined. I was a gambler then, but young in the profession, and would have quit it and followed better courses if I could have married her. She encouraged my suit, and her parents knew of no objection to me, and all was going sweetly and smoothly, when you interfered."

"I did my duty as a Christian," muttered the old man.

"Confound such duty! You made an infernal idiot of yourself, and destroyed all my hopes of happiness. You learned that I was a gambler, and you went to the girl and her parents, and told them that I was a man of bad character, with whom she could not be trusted. That set them against me, and she wrote me a letter, saying that she would never wish to see me again. When I called at the house I was refused admission, and when I met her on the street she would not speak to me. So we were separated, and my hope of a new and better life was blasted. That was your doing, Timothy Marlow."

"I only did my duty," muttered the old man again.

"It was an officious and intermeddling kind of duty. Then I had a duty to perform, too, and my duty was that of revenge. I swore by my ruined hopes that I would get even with you, and more than even if I could. I could no longer see the girl I loved; but there was another woman whom I could see, and I met her often, and she, too, was taken with my handsome face and dashing ways. That woman was the wife of the Methodist minister at Anoka. She was your wife, Timothy Marlow."

The Mad Parson shivered as if he had been seized by an ague, and Susie uttered a choking cry.

"When she left you," continued the gambler, "you could never find out when or how she left, or with whom she had gone, as I had managed matters so well that I had never been seen in her company, and I was then far from Anoka. I, and nobody but I, knew what had become of her, because she went to meet me when she left Anoka, and after that she was mine, to do as I pleased with her."

"What did you do with her?" feebly inquired the old man.

"I treated her well, as I became very fond of her, and surrounded her with plenty of comforts and luxuries. She had no cause to complain of me, and she never did complain."

"Where is she now?"

"In her grave. She lived but about three years after she left Anoka. She had no disease that the doctors could give a name to, but just faded away, and died calmly and peacefully, with every attention that could be bestowed upon her. I treated that woman well, Timothy Marlow, and had the satisfaction of knowing

that I had got even with you that far. But I was not satisfied. I had not even then fully got even with you for the ruin of my life, and I felt a craving for more revenge. So I hunted you up. You were hard to find; but I struck you at last in Topnotch, and I think now that I am in a fair way to get all the revenge I want."

As Dan Lasher spoke these words, he gave Susan Marlow a look that made her face turn pale with fear, while her father's face turned red as the fierce anger boiled up in his breast.

"You don't mean it," gasped the old man. "It is not possible. After the mother, you surely would not—"

"Take the daughter?" calmly replied the gambler. "Of course I will. That is what I want to do and mean to do. That is just what I am here for. The daughter is more to my taste than the mother was, and she will complete my revenge in a style that suits me."

"But that is too horrible. You surely cannot mean it. Take my life. Torture me in any way you please. Let my end be as miserable as Satan may prompt you to make it. But spare that innocent girl. She has never harmed you."

"Don't be silly, old man. I shall torture you in my own way, and I know just where the knife will cut the deepest. Perhaps I may marry her. It will depend on how she behaves. But I have got her, and I mean to keep her."

"You brutal, cowardly scoundrel!" shouted the old man as he started up from his seat. "Do you know what I am going to do to you?"

His arms were behind his back, just as when he was first tied, and, except for the fire in his face, he looked as broken and helpless as he had appeared to be when he was brought into the cabin.

"As you can do nothing at all," coldly answered Lasher, "it is not worth while for me to make a guess at what you are going to do."

"I am going to kill you, you villain! Satan has saved me for this."

"Be quiet, father!" implored Susie. "Do not anger him, or he may murder you."

"Murder me?" shrieked the mad prisoner. "Murder me? It is I who mean to murder him!"

The gambler got up one of his best sneers for the occasion.

"Sit down, you old fool!" he said, a little savagely. "You are helpless, and you ought to know it. I could break you like a straw."

"Here's your chance, then. Break me!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BLANTON ON THE TRAIL.

It was but little more than an hour after Timothy Marlow had left his ruined home on the plateau, to begin the blind search for his daughter, when another man climbed the slope from the trail.

This was a younger man than the Mad Parson, who would gladly have recognized him, had he come sooner, as Burch Blanton.

He had taken the earliest opportunity that his duties allowed him to visit his betrothed, and was expecting to pass a pleasant evening up there.

When he had reached the level of the plateau, and was walking briskly toward the house, he was surprised at perceiving that there was no light visible.

At first he thought that he might be mistaken or that something hid the light from him; but a nearer approach convinced him that the house was dark and apparently deserted.

What was the matter? What had become of Susan Marlow and her people? Had they gone away and left the house locked?

There was nobody near enough for them to visit, and Susan, at least, had never been known to absent herself from the plateau after dark.

It must be, then, that some disaster had occurred.

Filled with fearful apprehensions, the engineer hurried toward the house, and stumbled, as Timothy Marlow had done over the body of young Marvel; but it was wrapped in a blanket, and he did not stop to discover what it was.

Reaching the house, he found his worst fears confirmed.

The door was open, and a light that he made showed him a picture of ruin and desolation within.

Neither Susan Marlow nor any other living person was to be found, and the destruction that was visible told its own story.

There could be no doubt that the place had been raided, and that Susan Marlow had been killed or carried off.

Not killed, it was probable, as the raiders would not have been likely to remove her body, but taken away, it might be, to a fate that was worse than death.

Burch Blanton was wild with anger and apprehension; but he tried to calm himself and consider the affair coolly.

Who had perpetrated this outrage, and what had become of Susan Marlow?

His suspicions at once settled upon the outlaws

with whom Dan Lasher and some of his friends were known to have taken refuge.

Two of them had recently been hanged, and as the Mad Parson had "assisted" at that performance, the others might have wreaked their vengeance by raiding his home; or it might be that they had captured Susan with the intention of making her pay for the part she had taken in the defeat of their attack upon the mine.

Whatever the motive, those mountain toughs were known to be a powerful and desperate band, the more so since they had gained the aid and leadership of Dan Lasher.

They were not only dangerous but were hard to find, and it would be useless for him to attempt to seek them in the night or at any other time.

Where was Susan's father at the time of the raid? Where was Caesar, the dwarf?

Neither of them, if they had been there at the time of the raid, could have been left alive, and yet there was nothing to show that either of them had met a violent death.

Was it possible that the scoundrels had found the girl there alone and helpless?

It occurred to the engineer that he had stumbled over something outside that had a peculiar feeling, and that he ought to find out what it was.

Perhaps it was a bundle of clothing or bedding, which the raiders had prepared, but had concluded to throw away, and yet it had not felt like anything of that kind.

He took his light—a bit of candle which he had happened to bring away from the mine—and went out to look at the "something."

Unrolling the blanket in which it was wrapped, he was not really surprised by the discovery that it was the dead body of a man; but he was more than surprised when he perceived that the body was that of Simon Marvel!

A closer inspection showed that the young man had been shot, and the conclusion was easy that he had been at the house when it was attacked, and had been slain in endeavoring to defend Susan against her assailants.

But it was not to be supposed that the raiders had taken the trouble to cover his body with a blanket, and who could have done that for him?

This was a conundrum which Burch Blanton could not guess; but one thing was clear to him, and that was that he must give information of the disaster as speedily as possible to those who would be able and willing to help him search for Susan Marlow, and to avenge the murder of Simon Marvel.

The outlaws, if they had done the foul work, had accomplished more than two objects by their raid, and had got even with more than one of their presumed enemies.

Even if the engineer should be able to find them, it would be useless for one man to "tackle" the band, especially on their own ground.

Therefore he must hasten to get help.

Covering the body of Simon Marvel as he had found it, he added something in the way of weight to keep the blanket in its place, and hurried away from the desolate house with a sorrowful heart, full of the darkest fears, but animated by a fierce desire to rescue Susie Marlow and avenge her wrongs.

He almost tumbled down the slope in his eagerness to get away from the plateau, and narrowly escaped serious injury that would have spoiled his usefulness for the purpose on which he was bent.

As the night was intensely dark, and the trail by no means a broad and easy one, Blanton's return journey was not as rapid as the upward trip had been, though he exerted himself to the utmost to get forward as speedily as possible.

He had come to the plateau on the wings of love, full of pleasant thoughts and joyful anticipations; he was returning with a leaden heart, inwardly cursing the obstacles which the darkness and the rough trail placed in his way.

When he reached the mine, the first business connected with the search was there, and he attended to it as quickly as possible.

He sent word to a few of the miners upon whom he knew he could rely, and requested them to join him in Topnotch at once.

Then he mounted the only horse at the mine, and rode to town as fast as the animal could carry him.

The first person to be seen was Jacob Marvel, whom he routed out of his bed at Burnham's Hotel, to inform him of the death of his son.

The old Tycoon was so completely broken down by this terrible intelligence, that he was at first quite incapable of action, and could not even fix his mind upon the subject sufficiently to decide what should be done.

Then he was wild with rage, filled with an almost insane desire for vengeance upon the murderers of his son, but was still so excited by grief as well as by anger, that he was nearly useless for the purpose in hand.

Blanton, however, attended to the most important part of the business, and did so with the least possible delay.

He sent word to the two Eaglesons, who were

routed out of their beds as Jacob Marvel had been, and who hurried to the hotel to get full details of the sad news.

When these were furnished them by Blanton, Ben Eagleson was at once up in arms and eager for the fray.

Nothing, he declared, would please him better than a chance to get at Dan Lasher and the men in the mountains, whose presence there was a continual menace to the peace of the Topnotch district.

If they could be in some way cleaned out, killed or driven off, the labors of the Marshal of Topnotch would be lightened considerably.

All he wanted was a decent pretext or excuse for hunting them down and making a finish of the band.

He was, also, more than anxious to settle with them, if they should prove to be guilty, for the murder of Simon Marvel, whose simple and straightforward ways had endeared him to all who had really become acquainted with him.

As soon as he had learned the particulars of the disaster at the Mad Parson's home, Ben Eagleson went in search of Pete Gannon, no longer known as El Paso Pete, whom he easily found and brought to the hotel.

Pete Gannon was also eager to go in pursuit of the scoundrels up the mountain, his ardor being increased by the remembrance of the ignominious treatment he had received at the hands of Dan Lasher, from whom he had barely escaped with his life.

He made an important contribution to the necessary knowledge of the situation in the statement that he had already sought and found the camp or settlement of the outlaws, and that he could easily lead a party to it.

Jacob Marvel, who had at first been helpless, and then wildly excited, had fallen into a sort of a stupor; but this statement of the detective's aroused him, and he took a lively interest in the preparations for the pursuit of the outlaws.

His clear head, his first-rate executive ability, and the money which he freely offered for the equipment and reward of an expedition, speedily straightened out all the tangles, and enabled his lieutenants to get everything in proper trim and train.

Ben Eagleson and Pete Gannon hastened away to get together a sufficient force of good fighting men.

While they were absent, the miners upon whom Burch Blanton had called for assistance reached Topnotch, and came to the hotel, where they were at once recognized and accepted by the old Tycoon as valuable auxiliaries.

The night was then ended, as Blanton's trip from the plateau up the mountain, together with the subsequent explanations and arrangements, had taken a great deal of time.

When Ben Eagleson and Pete Gannon had recruited their forces, and the superintendent had attended to procuring the equipments and supplies for the expedition, the morning was so far advanced that it was deemed best for all to get their breakfast before they left Topnotch.

Burch Blanton groaned inwardly and grumbled audibly at these delays; but he knew that he had done all he could to start a speedy pursuit, and was compelled to curb his impatience as far as he was able to.

As soon as breakfast was over, Jacob Marvel set out with a party for Timothy Marlow's ruined home, to bring away the body of his son, and the expedition of search and revenge started for the upper mountain in a different direction.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

COMING TO A CRISIS.

By common consent it was settled that Dan Lasher and his comrades, or at least the mountain men with whom he had taken refuge, and perhaps the entire band, were responsible for the raid upon the plateau, for the death of Simon Marvel, and for the disappearance of Susan Marlow.

As for the fate of the Mad Parson and the dwarf, that was a problem which nobody could do more than guess at.

Therefore the haunt of the outlaws was the point at which the expedition must strike, and thither it started to go, under the guidance and direction of Pete Gannon.

Others in the party had a more or less distinct idea of the location of the mountain camp and the route by which it might be reached; but the detective from the South was the only one who had really been there, and who had noted the most direct and accessible way to get to it.

It was useless to attempt to ride, as Gannon declared that the greater part of the route was entirely too rough for horses to travel, and so they went on afoot.

As fate would have it, Pete Gannon was not so well acquainted with the course as he had believed himself to be, though he was loth to confess that fact, and did not confess it until the confession was fairly forced from him.

Finally he could no longer doubt that he had lost his way, and he found himself in such a tangle that he was obliged to declare that he did not know where he was.

More than one of the party had suspected as much, but all accepted the situation with reasonable equanimity, except Burch Blanton, who

was so angry at the repeated interruptions and delays that he fairly raved, and came near having a personal difficulty with the detective who had misled the party.

When this trouble was settled, scouts were sent out to look for the trail, as it was certain that there was a trail which led to the haunt of the outlaws.

At last the trail was found by Pete Gannon, who hurried back to the rendezvous, and joyfully announced his discovery.

He was sure, too, that it was the right trail, as he had seen landmarks which he had noted on his previous journey.

As soon as the other scouts were called in by a signal that had been agreed upon, the party set forward again; but their progress was by no means rapid, as the route was a very difficult one.

So it happened that it was already night when Gannon informed them that they were within gunshot distance of the outlaws' camp.

Then they moved more cautiously and quietly, sending two scouts in advance of the main body, and finally, without any further misadventure, they reached a point where they could look down into the basin in which Timothy Marlow had been so ignominiously captured.

Though they could look down, there was little they could see, as the darkness prevented them from doing more than getting a glimpse of the outlines of the cabins, which might have been easily mistaken for chunks of rock or clumps of deeper blackness.

A fire had been burning in the middle of the basin; but it was then merely a heap of embers, and no sign of life was visible to the watchers from above.

It was agreed that one of the party should go down there as a scout, to reconnoiter the ground, to discover the location of the outlaws, and to consider what plan of attack would be the most likely to put them at a disadvantage.

Pete Gannon volunteered for this duty, and was accepted, as being the fittest person in the party for such an errand, and he slipped down the slope so quietly that nothing was heard of him after he left his comrades.

It was Burch Blanton's opinion that they ought at once to rush down into the basin and begin aggressive operations; but Ben Eagleson reminded him that there was nothing to warrant them in attacking a quiet and apparently peaceable settlement or camp.

As they had nothing but guesswork for the suspicion that the men down there had been guilty of the outrage and murder at Timothy Marlow's home, it would be necessary to wait until some proof against them could be found, or until by some act of lawlessness they should invite a deadly assault.

Blanton, who was boiling over with impatience, was compelled to be satisfied with this, though he was by no means content.

Having ideas of his own, he soon slipped away from his companions, and followed the detective down the slope, making his way about as quietly as the other man had done.

Pete Gannon, who had been there before, and had a pretty good idea of the location of the cabins, as well as of the general contour and style of the basin, had instantly formed a plan, which he proceeded to carry out with his usual coolness and very quietly.

Nothing was stirring in the basin when he got down there, and the reasonable conclusion was that the occupants of the cabins were enjoying sleep, though it might not be the sleep of the just.

At one cabin, however, he caught a glimpse of a faint light that came through the chinks of the logs.

Thither he bent his steps, as that was the only sign of life which he had yet seen.

As he approached the rude building he heard the sound of voices, or, at least, of one voice, and he fancied that he recognized it.

Arrived in front of the cabin, his fancy became a fact, as he knew the voice to be that of Dan Lasher.

Planting himself in front of the door, he found near it a pretty large chink, through which he could get a good view of what was going on inside.

The first thing he saw was Dan Lasher, seated on a rude stool in the middle of the little room, about opposite to the door, and it was Handsome Dan who was doing the talking.

At his left, in a corner of the cabin, the Mad Parson could be dimly seen by the uncertain light of a grease lamp.

The old man had a seat somewhat similar to that of Lasher's, and his hands were evidently tied behind his back, and he appeared to be completely broken down, cowed and dispirited.

In another corner was seated a young woman whom the detective recognized as Susan Marlow.

She seemed to be very pale, though her paleness might have been caused by the peculiar dim light, and in her face was an expression of resolute defiance, mingled with extreme anxiety.

Dan Lasher, as has been said, was doing the talking, and the detective was in time to hear a considerable part of what he said to the Mad Parson.

He heard the gambler tell how he had persuaded Timothy Marlow's wife to quit her husband and meet him at a distant town.

He heard the old man ask what had become of her, and heard Lasher tell of her death.

At this the detective gritted his teeth, and looked as if he might have something to say or do concerning that matter.

Then the gambler announced his intentions concerning Susan, and the old man implored him to forego his purpose, and Lasher gave him scorn in return for his entreaties.

At this juncture the detective examined his revolver, to make sure that it was in serviceable condition.

Then he noiselessly tried the door, to ascertain whether it was locked, and discovered that it would open easily.

He did not seem to be fulfilling the mission on which his comrades had sent him down into the basin, as his investigations were confined to one point; but that point appeared to him to be of more importance than anything else he could take hold of, and he believed that in the circumstances he was doing the best he could.

He listened while the Mad Parson declared that he meant to kill his persecutor, a threat which the gambler treated with contempt.

When the old man arose from his seat and shouted his defiance, Pete Gannon admired his pluck, but condemned his discretion.

What could he do, old and feeble, bound and weaponless, against a stalwart adversary, who had the full control of his movements, and who was doubtless well "heeled?"

As Dan Lasher had said, he could break the old man like a straw, and Gannon looked to see him do it when the defiance was shouted at him.

Handsome Dan did not stir a hand or foot; but the Mad Parson did.

He developed a suddenness and a power that for an instant surprised and almost stunned the detective.

His arms, which had seemed to be tied behind his back, flew from that position, long and sinewy and capable, and his feeble and helpless look disappeared, giving place to the furious aspect of a man who was thoroughly angry and savagely in earnest.

Suddenly he leaped upon his adversary with the spring of a panther, and clutched his throat with those long and sinewy fingers.

Dan Lasher was so surprised by this sudden and vigorous attack, that he was thrown off his balance, and was nearly strangled before he could summon his senses to aid him.

Exerting all his strength, he wrenched himself loose from that frenzied grasp, and hurriedly drew his revolver, though it seemed that his hands ought to be sufficient for an encounter with that feeble old man.

But Susan Marlow, starting up with a short cry, had already rushed to her father's help.

Seizing the gambler's hand, she diverted his aim so that the bullet from his pistol went harmlessly upward when he fired.

Just then Pete Gannon threw open the door and ran in, making the odds decidedly against Dan Lasher.

The Mad Parson needed no help.

Recovering himself as soon as he had been thrown off, he returned to the attack, and again clutched the gambler's throat with his long and sinewy fingers.

This time he got such a deadly grip that it could not be shaken off, as his adversary's breath was stopped, and his strength went with it.

The gambler turned black in the face, weakened visibly, and fell backward on the floor, with the Mad Parson on top of him.

Thus far the contest was in favor of Timothy Marlow, and the only question was whether the pistol-shot would arouse the men in the other cabins and bring them to the aid of their chief.

To prevent that as far as possible, Peter Gannon drew his revolver, and faced the open door.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MOUNTAIN WAR.

As Burch Blanton had his own ideas of the proper mode of attack by the expedition of search and revenge, so he took his own view of the situation as he found it in the basin.

He quickly discovered that there were four cabins, which were presumably occupied by sleepers, as everything was quiet about them.

From one of them, however, came faint glimpses of light, and at the door a man was standing, who was doubtless Pete Gannon.

The detective appeared to be looking, or listening, and doing nothing else, and Blanton was of the opinion that he had better not be interfered with, as he might have some purpose which he deemed of special importance.

Yet, though the other cabins were so quiet, it occurred to Blanton that any moment something might happen to arouse their occupants, in which case they might be expected to sally forth and "play the wild."

At their own homes, and with their knowledge of the locality, they would have such an advantage as might make them hard to handle if their fighting blood was up.

If they could be confined to their quarters,

with the only way of egress well guarded, the affair would be greatly simplified.

Upon these ideas the engineer formed his plan, and hastened to put it in execution.

He decided that he must take upon himself the mission which Pete Gannon appeared to be neglecting.

He went back to his comrades as quickly and quietly as possible, told them what he had seen, and explained his simple plan, urging that it should be adopted immediately, before the outlaws could get out and put themselves in a position of defense.

Ben Eagleson took kindly to this suggestion, the more so as he perceived that it would not be an aggressive act to station guards at the cabins, and that the blame of the fight, if there was to be a fight, might be put on the shoulders of the mountain men.

As the other members of the expedition were eager to get to work, no time was lost in adopting Blanton's plan.

They hastened down into the basin, and the marshal, with the aid of Blanton's advice, at once assigned the men to their positions.

Before they were fully in place, the report of a pistol-shot sounded from one of the cabins, and immediately there was a stir in the settlement.

An outsider would not have supposed that such a shot, fired inside of one of the cabins, could have awakened sleeping men in another; but those mountaineers were very quick of hearing, and they usually slept, as the saying is, with one eye open.

Ben Eagleson, with three of his party, had just stationed himself in front of a cabin, when there was a bustle inside, and the door was quickly opened.

Three men started to rush out, looking as if they had been suddenly aroused from sleep, but also looking as if they had tumbled into bed with their clothes on, and had consequently not been compelled to waste any time in dressing.

"Halt, there!" ordered the marshal, as the first man made his appearance.

"What in blazes would we halt for, and who air you, anyhow?"

"Officers of the law! Stay where you are, or we will shoot you down!"

"Will you? Reckon two kin play at that! Come on, boys!"

The three outlaws made a break, but the chances were against them, as they might have known if they had not been the ruffians and toughs they were.

Not only did they have to face four wide-awake and well-armed men, but the narrow doorway through which they must pass put them at a great disadvantage, as they could easily be marked as they emerged from the cabin.

So their bold break broke them up.

When two of them had been shot down, the third begged for quarter, and thus was ended the first conflict in the basin.

The attention of the victors was immediately called to another quarter, where a pretty hot fight had been begun.

At the second cabin, which was nearer than the first to that from which the shot had come, and further from Eagleson's men as they entered the basin, the occupants had already got outside when their enemies came in sight of them, and were hurrying toward the place where they knew the shot had been fired.

Thus the men from Topnotch were compelled to pursue them, instead of meeting and stopping them.

They did not allow the firing at the first cabin to distract their attention from the business at hand; for it was evident that "the old man," as they called Dan Lasher, was in danger, and that they must hurry to help him.

At the door of his cabin they were met by Pete Gannon, who resolutely opened fire with his revolver, and bravely defended the entrance.

Burch Blanton, who had a sort of roving commission in command of his men from the mine, had started toward the same cabin, and he reached it in time to give the detective the assistance that he sorely needed.

Then the others came up, and short work was made of that detachment of outlaws, but not until Pete Gannon had been badly wounded.

At the remaining cabin which may be called the fourth, the Topnotch men had not had anything like so easy a time.

In that cabin there were half a dozen men, outnumbering by two the force that was sent against them, and they had the whip hand of their adversaries, as all had got outside when the detachment of Topnotch men came at them.

They treated with derision the order to halt and surrender, and began business by immediately assuming the aggressive.

The Topnotch men forced to retreat, called on their friends for help, and Ben Eagleson and his party, having won their part of the fight, hurried to them, reaching them in time to stop their adversaries from going to the assistance of their own friends at Dan Lasher's cabin.

The outlaws, perceiving that the odds were then against them, scattered, and began a guerilla fight.

Circling around the cabin, and availing themselves of such cover as they knew to be handy, they were difficult to get at, and their presence was decidedly dangerous.

Desirous of avoiding bloodshed as far as was possible, Ben Eagleson called off his men, and started a new scheme for the discomfiture of the enemy.

As the darkness favored the outlaws, who were thoroughly acquainted with every foot of ground in the basin, he decided that there should be no darkness.

Therefore he set fire to one of the cabins, and soon had it burning briskly and brightly.

Thus he made a light by which the whereabouts of the outlaws could be discovered, and deprived them of one of their places of refuge.

Another cabin was fired, and another, and then all were in a blaze, except that which was occupied by Dan Lasher.

The rest of the work, owing to the light and the destruction, was easy enough.

Of the remaining outlaws, some were shot, and a few were captured, but the most of them escaped, glad to get off with whole skins, and the mountain war was ended.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE END OF HANDSOME DAN.

THE battle in the basin being ended, the attention of the victors was directed to the casualties of the campaign, which were not as light as the leader of the expedition had hoped they might be.

Two of the Topnotch men had been killed outright; two, including Pete Gannon, were badly wounded, and there were a few slight wounds which were not counted.

The losses of the outlaws were considerably heavier; but there was no sympathy for any of them, as they had long been a nuisance and a terror to the Topnotch region.

In front of Dan Lasher's cabin, where the hottest fight was made, the mountain men had suffered the most severely.

Susan Marlow, hearing the shots and the tumult outside, had been filled with fears and anxieties; but Pete Gannon had tried to calm and console her as soon as he could, assuring her that it was "all right."

Following this assurance, Burch Blanton rushed into the cabin, and the next moment she was clasped in the arms of her lover.

"You are safe!" exclaimed Burch. "I am so thankful! How is your father?"

Timothy Marlow was standing silent in the middle of the room, looking down upon the form of his late persecutor and antagonist, who lay insensible on the floor.

Pete Gannon had intended to pull the old man off before he could crush the life out of his enemy, but had been compelled to give his undivided attention to the detachment of outlaws who attacked the cabin.

When he had been wounded, he got into a safe place, attempting to stop the flow of blood, and saw the Mad Parson standing there, looking down at Handsome Dan.

"I wonder if that man is dead," he remarked. "I hope he is," calmly answered the Mad Parson. "He ought to be. I meant to kill him, and he deserved death after he told me of what he had done and expected to do."

"Yes, I heard that, or the most of it, and I will have something to say about that after a while. But I hope the man is not dead. There may be something to be got out of him. If I was able—"

"You are pretty badly off, yourself, Mr. Gannon," broke in Burch Blanton. "Let me see if I can straighten you up."

The young engineer was not a bad rough surgeon, and Ben Eagleson had wisely included in the stores of the expedition a few appliances for wounds and other casualties.

Blanton called him in, and between them they dressed the detective's wound in fairly good style.

Then, at Gannon's earnest request, they applied themselves to an attempt to bring the insensible Dan Lasher back to life.

Whisky was the principal remedy applied in that case.

Administering it liberally internally, and vigorously rubbing it on externally, they soon had the satisfaction—if it was a satisfaction—of seeing the patient gasp and open his mouth and eyes.

He was propped up against the wall, but his senses did not seem to return to him, and he sat there silent and motionless, looking as if there was no life in him worth speaking of.

"You said that you might have something to say, Mr. Gannon," remarked Timothy Marlow, "about the story that man told me. What is it?"

"I have to say that what he told you was partly the truth, but mostly a lie. Your wife, Mr. Marlow, is not dead."

"Not dead? Is that possible?"

"Not dead?" exclaimed Susan. "Is my mother alive?"

"She was alive a month or so ago, to my certain knowledge," answered the detective. "That man lied, too, when he said that she had been living with him as his wife. She had never done anything of the kind. I took pains to trace the whole matter through a long time ago."

"What became of her, then?" demanded the Mad Parson.

"That is what I am going to tell you. It is true that he enticed her away from Anoka; but, when she reached the town where she was to meet him, she repented, and refused to have anything to do with him. He left her in anger, and since then has often met and annoyed her, but to no purpose."

"But, what became of her?" again demanded the old man.

"She was ashamed and afraid to return to her home—ashamed to meet her child, and afraid to face her husband."

"She would have been gladly welcomed. My wife, the mother of my child, could never have been turned away."

Susie had gone to her father's side and taken his hand, and just then she kissed him.

"Do you know where she is now?" he asked.

"I do not. She supported herself in one way and another, but always honestly, and her work, together with her desire to avoid that man, kept her moving from place to place. A month or so ago I knew where she was; but she was then about to leave that place. Probably that lying wretch knows where she is, and I wish he could be made to tell."

"You have been some time in Topnotch. Why did you not give me this information sooner?"

"Because I wanted first to find out how your wife would be treated if she should return to you. Besides, she had made me promise to keep her secret. I would not have told it yet, had it not been for the meanness of that man's lies to you. I wish the truth could be squeezed out of him."

Dan Lasher was seated as he had been left, propped up against the log wall of the cabin, looking as if his body had broken down and his mind had deserted him.

Yet he was not without intelligence, and now and then, when Pete Gannon was speaking, his eyes glittered, and his lip curled with scorn.

When the detective wished that the truth could be squeezed out of him, he almost laughed.

"It shall be done," declared the old man. "If he knows anything he will have to tell it."

Ben Eagleson had come in with a few others, and had listened to the greater part of this conversation.

He now went outside with Marlow and Burch Blanton and the rest, leaving one man to watch the gambler.

Outside they held a consultation, at the close of which they filed into the cabin, all looking solemn, as if they had settled a very serious question.

"Dan Lasher," said the marshal, as he stood and faced the prisoner, "it has been decided by this committee that you deserve death, because you are responsible for the death of Simon Marvel, and because you carried this young lady away from her home with most villainous intentions."

The prisoner sneered faintly.

"It has been decided that you must hang," continued the marshal; "but we mean to give you a chance for your life. If you will tell this old man where his wife can be found, and will leave this part of the country never to return, we will let you go."

"Tell me where she is, so that I can get her," implored the Mad Parson, "and I will forgive you all the wrong you have done and intended to me and mine!"

The gambler's sneer, though evident, was a very feeble one, and his voice could hardly be heard as he answered:

"I don't know where she is."

"Get a rope!" ordered Ben Eagleson.

When the rope was brought there was no use for it.

Dan Lasher's face had turned ghastly, his open eyes were glazed, his jaw dropped, a shiver passed over his frame, and he died with a sneer on his lip—no longer Handsome Dan, but a corpse which looked like the body of a man at least fifty years old.

"I killed him," said the Mad Parson, "and I meant to. Satan saved me for that, and now Satan will loose his grip on me."

The few outlaws who were held as prisoners were allowed to go, after being warned that it would not be safe for them to show their faces in the Topnotch district again.

The man who killed Caesar, the dwarf, would surely have been hanged if he had been caught; but he had made his escape.

Decent burial was given the two Topnotch men who had fallen in the battle; but it was decided that cremation would be the best way to dispose of the others.

Therefore their bodies, after all had been duly searched, were carried into the cabin where Dan Lasher lay, and the cabin was set on fire in several places.

It burned brilliantly, and by its light the expedition left the basin with Timothy Marlow and his daughter.

CHAPTER XL.

SUSIE'S DOWER.

TIMOTHY MARLOW did not return to his ruined home, but went to Topnotch with the others, where he left Susie at Burnham's hotel, greatly to the satisfaction of Burch Blanton.

Accompanied by Pete Gannon, he went away on a long journey, his purpose being well known to his daughter and her betrothed.

With the aid of the detective, he finally discovered his long-lost wife, and easily persuaded her to return with him to Topnotch.

There was a joyful reunion of Susie and her mother, and it was agreed that the past should be buried in oblivion, and a new life should begin for all three.

Matters being so pleasantly arranged, Blanton pressed for an early marriage, and his request, as it was favored by Susie, was readily granted.

The young people were married at the hotel, and their marriage was the occasion of a general jubilee at Topnotch, as well as at the mine.

Shortly after the marriage the old couple went to the yet desolate home on the plateau, to restore the ruined furniture, and generally put the place in order.

This task was soon completed to the satisfaction of all, and the home looked brighter and more beautiful than ever.

In the midst of this happiness it was evident that something was preying on the young husband's mind, and after a while he made known the cause of his anxiety.

"I will be very sorry, Mr. Marlow," said he, "to take Susie away from you and from this pleasant home, but I am afraid that I will be forced to do so before long, as my business—"

"Don't worry about your business, my son," broke in the old man. "I can easily convince you that there is more money for you right here than you will be likely to find anywhere else."

"How is that, Mr. Marlow? What do you mean?"

The father-in-law opened a trunk, from which he took a heavy canvas bag, and poured out on the floor a mass of gold nuggets and chips and splinters.

"Are those worth anything?" he asked.

"Worth anything?" replied the astonished young man. "I should say that they are. I have scarcely ever seen any such rich specimens. Where did they come from?"

"That bag, my boy, was on poor Caesar's body when he was killed by those scoundrels, and they neglected to search him. I took it from him, and fastened it upon my own person, and me, also, they failed to search, and so it happened that I brought the bag safely to Topnotch, and have it yet."

"But I don't understand. Where did Caesar get the specimens?"

"He chipped them off from the outcroppings of a little claim of mine near here."

"A little claim? I should think that you might well call it a big claim."

"Come with me. I will show it to you, and then you can decide whether it is a big claim."

Burch Blanton accompanied the old man to the narrow gulch where Caesar was working at the time of the raid on the plateau, and to the bonanza that was so well hid in a niche of the rock.

When the young engineer saw what was there, and examined the rock in the light of his geological knowledge and mining experience, it astonished him even more than the bag of specimens.

He declared that it was a wonderfully rich discovery, and that a fortune could easily be got out of it.

"That is my daughter's dower," said the old man. "The claim has been properly made and recorded, and it shall belong to you and Susie. You can easily get capital to work such a bonanza as that, and I venture to predict that the Topnotch Mine will not be a circumstance to it."

"But what do you expect to do?"

"I shall go back to the ministry of the Gospel. Satan has at last let me loose, and I am again fit to preach the Word. To that I shall devote what is left of my life."

And so it was. Timothy Marvel soon gathered a congregation in the rising town of Topnotch, to whom he ministered so acceptably that a church was built for him, and he was no longer known as Topnotch Tim or the Mad Parson, but as Parson Marlow, who was universally respected and loved.

Burch Blanton and his wife settled on the beautiful plateau, and his expectations concerning the bonanza in the gulch were more than realized.

The body of Caesar was removed from under the pile of stones, and was buried on the plateau, where his grave was carefully tended by Susan Blanton.

After the tragic events that followed the closing of the gaming-places and other resorts, Jacob Marvel and the rest of the Tycoons were disinclined to make any further efforts to regulate the morals of Topnotch, but allowed the town to run itself, greatly to the satisfaction and prosperity of the people.

THE END.

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